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FIENDS HAVE MADE

By

G. MANVILLE FENN





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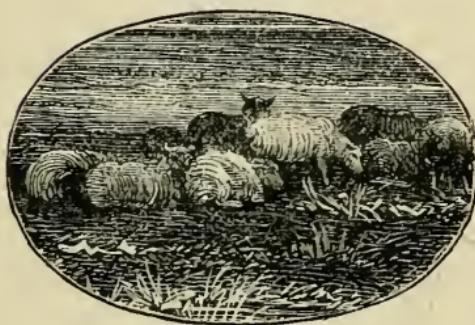
"IT WAS WITH TWO LITTLE CHILDREN THAT MARY MORRIS TRAMPED
AFTER THE REGIMENT"—(see p. 114).

FRIENDS I HAVE MADE.

• BY

G. MANVILLE FENN,

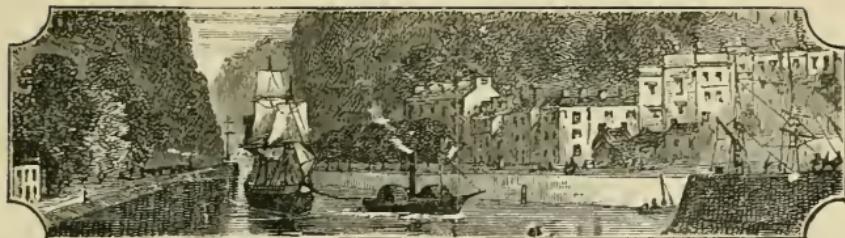
Author of "Adventures of Working Men."



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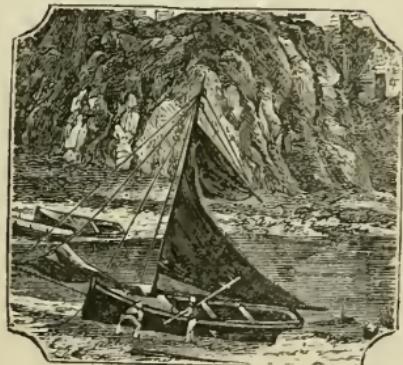
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FRIENDS I HAVE MADE.

CHAPTER I.

MY LIFE.



MAY I ask your patience while I introduce myself—the writer of the following chapters? I am sitting before the looking-glass at the end of my room as I write, not from any vanity, you will readily perceive that as you read on—but so that I may try and reflect with my ink the picture that I wish to present to you of a rather sad—I

only say *rather*, for, upon the whole, I am very cheerful,—thin, pale, careworn-looking woman, with hair that has long been scant and grey—whiter, perhaps, than that of many people at eight-and-forty.

Eight-and-forty ! What a great age that seems to the young ; and yet how few the years, save in one period of my life, have appeared to me ! At times I can hardly realize that I am decidedly elderly, so busy has been my life, so swiftly has it glided away, thinking so much as I have of other people and their lives as well as of my own.

I never knew how it was, but, somehow, those with whom I came in contact always seemed to look upon me, because I had had trouble, as one in whom they could confide. I never sought their confidence, but when some weary wayfarer in life's journey has held out a hand to me, asking help or advice, it has grown into my pleasure to try and aid or counsel as far as in me lay. And it is strange how relieved some have been, what a quiet solace it has seemed, to pour out into my sympathetic ear the salient passages of their troubled lives. " You have suffered, so you can feel," has always seemed to be the thought, expressed or unexpressed, of their hearts, and hence, without being inquisitive, I have been made the storehouse, so to speak, of that which I without any breach of confidence propose to tell.

I should first, though, tell you of myself, for why should I lay bare the sorrows of others without prefacing them with my own ?

A strangely quiet, uneventful life mine has been ; its incidents simple, its troubles many, and its pleasures—I was about to say few, but that would be false, for its pleasures have been great. They have not been the boisterous joys that fall to the lot of some ; but, feeling, as I do most thoroughly now, that the greatest delights, the purest and most unalloyed are

those which are unselfish, I can think and believe that my pleasures have been many.

I will, then, tell you my own little history first, slight as it is, and you may, in reading, find that it is the key-note to the simple chords that I afterwards strike in passing, and perhaps it will explain why others have come to me to tell me what they knew.

It is a tale of early sorrow, but you shall hear, and you will bear with me when I tell you that the wound has never healed, and if I put my hand above it, the place still throbs, even as it will beat and ache till kindly nature says to me, "Sleep, poor weary one, and rest." And then peacefully, trustingly, and with a simple hope of forgiveness, may I sleep that long sleep which they say so flippantly has no end ; but which has a waking, as every lesson which we learn in life persists in teaching.

You will smile, perhaps, when I tell you that I was once what people call pretty—that this pale, lined face was once plump and rosy, these sad eyes bright, and this grey scant hair golden-brown, long, and flowing. But why should I think you would smile ? Do I not know that you must have seen the gay young plant putting out its tender leaves in spring, growing green and luxuriant of foliage in summer, ripe and ruddy in autumn, and grey, bent, and withered in age ? And should I be pitied because I have but followed in the way of nature ? Surely not. It is not for that I ask your sympathy, but for the blight that fell upon the young plant, and seared and scathed it so that it seemed for months as if it would die ; but it lived, as I have lived to tell you this.

Do you know that wondrous feeling which comes in

the early year, and that strange sense of keen delight, that elasticity of spirit, when, full of youth and hope, the very tears of joyous sensibility start to the eyes as you wander amidst the trees and flowers in spring? I remember how I felt, oh! so well, even though it is now thirty years ago, and I was but eighteen.

Jack and I were engaged. It was all such a simple, homely affair. We had known one another for years—the children of neighbouring farmers. Jack—I still call him by the simple old pet name of those days—Jack had been away at a good school, and being bright, and shrewd, and clever, he had won his way on, taking to engineering instead of his father's farm life; and now it had come to this, that he had been staying at home for a month, previous to going out to a good appointment in Melbourne.

That month in spring, how it passed! We had met again and again, and in his honest, manly way he had asked me to be his wife.

"You know, Grace, that I have always loved you," he said; "and now I have hopes and prospects, it cannot be wrong to ask you for your promise."

We were walking by the river-side as he said this, and how well I can picture it all—the soft gliding water mirroring the trees on the opposite bank, the young green buds just breaking from their cases, and, above all, the soft tender blue of the spring sky—the blue, he had told me, that was like my eyes.

"Do you want me to promise, Jack?" I said, simply, as I looked up in his face.

"No, darling; I am satisfied," he cried, as his strong arms held me to his broad breast, and that was all. No oaths could have bound me more tightly to



BY THE RIVER SIDE—(see p. 4).

him. I felt that I was his wife when he should come to claim me some day—when?

We were late that evening, and entered the house shyly, for there had been so much to talk of and plan. In a month's time Jack was to sail for Melbourne; then he was to work very hard for three years, and come and fetch me to be his wife.

That month glided by, and the last day had come. It was, as I told you, spring-time—joyous spring-time, with the hawthorn's snowy blossoms, the apple-trees pink; and the pear-trees pearly with their pyramids of flowers. Every meadow I passed was starred with golden buttercups, and from every spray the birds trilled or jerked forth their merry songs of hope and love.

I could not feel sad, even though I was going to meet Jack for the last walk before he went away; but mingled with the feeling of ecstasy there was a strange tearfulness of eye, and my breath would come at times with a sob.

He was by the stile, waiting for me—the stile down by the long mead, half-way between the two farms—and as he took my hand in his, we neither of us spoke, but stood gazing away over woodland and meadow, all clad in their wondrous beauty, and listened to the birds. Now it was the soft tender coo of the stock-dove from the wood, now the jerked-out twittering song of the linnets; then, soft and mellow, from the thick hedge-rows floated towards us the fluty notes of the blackbird, while far on high trilled away the larks, singing one against the other to their mates, sitting in the tall grass of the golden meads.

We could not talk, our hearts were too full, for Jack

was to be off at daybreak the next morning. But there was no need for words. We loved each other in the simple nature-taught way that has been since the world began, and we knew that every joyous song around that thrilled upon our ears meant love, and even in our sorrow we were happy.

“Only three years, darling,” Jack whispered to me, “and then——”

The tears rose to my eyes as I tried to answer him, but I could not speak a word.

“And you will let me find a long letter when I get there?” he said tenderly.

“Yes, Jack, I promise,” I said, and then it was time to return, for the hours had glided by, how we could not tell.

Jack spent the evening with us at home, and then he left us hurriedly, for our farewells had been said in the wood, and it was one hearty kiss, given and taken before the old people, and then good-bye.

But I saw him pass soon after daybreak, and he saw me, and waved his hand, for I had sat by the window all night, lest I might let him go by, and I asleep.

And then time glided on sadly, but pleasantly as well. Mine was a busy life, for soon my father took to his bed, ill—a bed he never left again, for he gradually sank and died, leaving my poor mother in very indifferent circumstances.

It was a hard blow for us both, for he had been one of the kindest and truest of men; but while poor mother pined and waited, I had my hopeful days in view, and from time to time letters from dear Jack, all so frank and honest, and full of trust in the future, that I felt

as if I could not repine, even when greater troubles fell upon me.

For at the end of two years I was standing by the bed-side where lay poor mother sinking fast. She had had no particular ailment, but had literally pined and wasted away. The bird had lost its mate of many years, and when at last she kissed me, and said, "Good-bye," it seemed to me to be in a quiet rest-seeking spirit, and she spoke like one looking hopefully forward to the meeting with him who had gone before.

But she could think of me even then, and almost the last whispered words were—

"Only eleven months, Grace, and then he will be back to fetch you."

Poor mother! she would not have passed so peacefully away if she had known that which I withheld—namely, the news that had come to me from our lawyer. For, through the failure of the enterprise in which my father's savings had been invested, and which brought us a little income of sixty pounds a year, I was left penniless—so poor, in fact, that the furniture of the cottage in the little town, to which we had moved when we left the farm, had to be sold to defray the funeral expenses.

It was very hard to bear, and for a month I was terribly depressed; but there was that great hopeful time ever drawing near—the end of the three years, when Jack would come to fetch me to be his wife.

It was now for the first time that I remember feeling particular about my personal appearance, and I studied my glass to see if Jack would find me looking careworn and thin, and my glass told me truly—yes.

But I had to be up and doing, and before another

month was over, through the kindness of people whom we had known, I was placed where I could work contentedly for the bread I must earn till Jack should come to fetch me away.

It was at a large West-end dressmaker's, and it was hard work to get used to the hurry and excitement of the place, where there were twelve girls living in the house, and as many more came every day.

There were all kinds of petty pieces of tyranny to submit to at first, and I suppose some of the foolish girls were jealous of me and my looks, so much so that I found they nick-named me "The Beauty." Poor girls! If they had only known how little store I set by my looks, they would have behaved at first as they did later on.

The first thing that won them to me was when Mary Sanders was taken ill with a terrible fever. Madame Grainger was for sending her away at once, on account of her business, and the infection; but the doctor who was called in, a young, impetuous, but very clever man, told her that it would be at her peril if she did so, for Mary Sanders' life was in danger. So the poor girl was shut up in her bedroom, without a soul to go near her except a hired nurse, and after the first night this woman stayed away.

No one dared go near the poor girl then, so I timidly asked leave to nurse her, for I felt no fear of the infection, and it seemed so hard for her to be left there alone.

I obtained leave, and went upstairs, staying with her till she recovered; and from that day there was always a kind look for me, and a kiss from every girl in the place.

What was more, oddly enough, perhaps because I was so quiet and restrained, first one girl and then another came to make me the confidante of her love-secrets, and ask my advice.

I gave it, such as it was, though heartsore myself, for Jack's letters to me had suddenly ceased. We had corresponded so regularly ; but it had struck me that his last two letters had been formal and constrained ; they were full of business matters too, and he had hinted at its being possible that he should not be able to keep time about the three years, in consequence of some contract.

I did not think this when I first read these letters, for then I had kissed and cried over them ; but when no reply came to my last, I re-read them, and the coldness seemed apparent.

But I waited and waited, and then news came from the country. Jack's father, a widower, had died suddenly ; and I said to myself, with throbbing heart, as I longed to be at his side to try and comfort him in his affliction, " Poor Jack, he will come home now."

But he did not come, neither did I get any reply to my last two letters. Another month, and the three years would be up ; and as I sat over some work one spring morning by the open window, with a bunch of violets that one of the girls had brought me in a glass, the soft breeze that came floating over the chimney-pots and sooty roofs, wafted to me the scent of the humble little blossoms, and my eyes became full of tears, for in an instant the busy work-room had passed away, and I was down home by the river-side, listening to dear Jack, as he asked me to be his wife.

Only a month ! only a month ! my pulses seemed to

beat ; and as it happened we were all busy upon a large wedding order, and I was stitching away at the white satin skirt intended for the bride.

I tried so hard to bear it, but I could not, the rush of feelings was too great. Another month, and he was to have fetched me to be his wife, and I had not had an answer to my last fond and loving letters.

As I said, I tried so hard to bear it, but I could not, and stifling a sob, I hurried out of the work-room to reach my attic, threw myself upon my knees by the bed, and burying my face in my hands, I sobbed as if my heart would break.

For the terrible thought would come now, fight against it as I would—"Jack has grown tired of waiting, and has married another."

I fought so hard with the disloyal thought, but it would come, and I was sobbing passionately, when I felt a soft arm steal round my neck, a tender cheek laid to mine, and I found my poor tear-dewed face drawn down upon the bosom of Mary Sanders, who had stolen out of the work-room, and come up to try and comfort me.

"Pray, pray, don't fret, my darling," she whispered. "Madame will be so cross. Those wedding things must be in by to-night, and they want you to help try them on."

I don't know how I got through that day and night, but I believe I did such duties as were expected from me mechanically, or as if I had been in a dream, and at night I lay wakeful and weary, with aching eyes and heart, thinking of that dreadful idea that was trying to force itself upon me.

I waited till the three years had expired, and then,

with what anguish of heart no words could tell, I wrote to Jack again—my fourth letter—begging him, imploring him to answer me, if but to tell me he was weary of his promise, and wished to be set free ; and then, making a superhuman effort over myself, I waited, waited, month by month, for an answer, though I knew that it must be at least six months before one could come.

I had given up expecting one in the interim, and I was too proud to send to his relatives—distant ones, whom I had never seen, and who had probably never heard of me. The thought had taken root now, and grown to a feeling of certainty : but I waited for my answer.

Three months—six months—nine months passed away, and hope was dead within my heart. They said I had grown much older and more careworn. Madame said I worked too hard, and the sharp business woman became quite motherly in her attentions to me. It was then I learned for the first time how good and true a woman was she whom I served. Her battle with the world had made her keen and firm in her dealings with her work-girls, for hers was no life of ease. The ladies she had to toil for were exacting and thoughtless to a degree, and constant business worries had made her at times most cold and strict, but she was always a lady, and more than once I felt that she must have moved in a sphere superior to my own. She had of late become most kind to me and pressed me to have a holiday. But I would not take any change, for work was like balm, it blunted my thoughts ; and knowing that I was daily growing pale and thin, I still waited.

I knew the girls used to whisper together about me,

and think me strange, but no one knew my secret—not even Madame, who had more than once sought my confidence ; and so twelve months passed away—four years since Jack had left me.

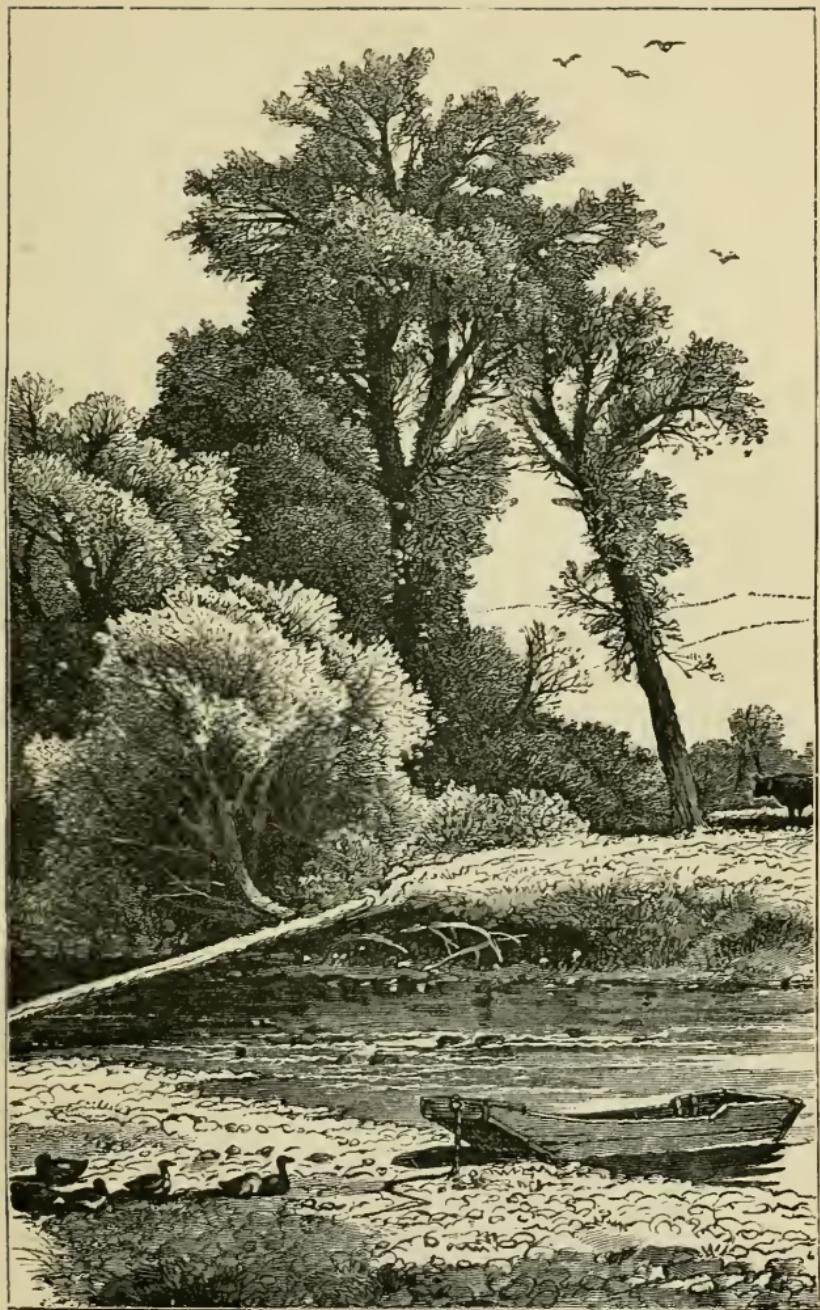
It was not to a day, but very nearly to the time when he had parted from me, and it was almost two years since I had heard from him. I was trying hard to grow patient and contented with my lot, for Madame Grainger had gradually taken to me, and trusted me, making me more and more her companion, when one glorious spring morning, as I was coming out of the breakfast-room to go upstairs to work, she called me into her little room, where she sat as a rule and attended to her customers' letters, for she had an extensive *clientèle*, and carried on business in a large private mansion in Welbeck Street.

“ Grace, my dear,” she said, taking me in her arms, and kissing me, “ it worries me to see you look so ill. Now, what do you say to a fortnight in the country ? ”

A fortnight in the country ! and at her busiest time, with the London season coming on.

I thought of that, and then, as I glanced round at the flowers and inhaled their scents, the bright fields near Templemore Grange floated before my dimming eyes, a feeling of suffocation came upon me, and the room seemed to swing round. I believe that for the first time in my life I should have fainted, so painful were the memories evoked by her words, when a sharp knock and ring at the door echoed through the house, following instantly upon the dull fall of a letter, and the sharp click of the letter-box.

It was like an electric shock to me, and without a word I darted into the hall, panting with excitement,



NEAR TEMPLEMORE GRANGE—(see p. 14).



and my hand at my throat to tear away the stifling sensation.

But it was a letter. I could see it through the glass in the letter-box, and I seized it with trembling hands, inspired as it were by some strange power.

“Jack! dear Jack at last!” I gasped as I turned it over, and saw it was a strange, blue, official-looking letter, formally directed to me.

Even that did not surprise me. It was from Jack, I knew, and I tore open the blue envelope.

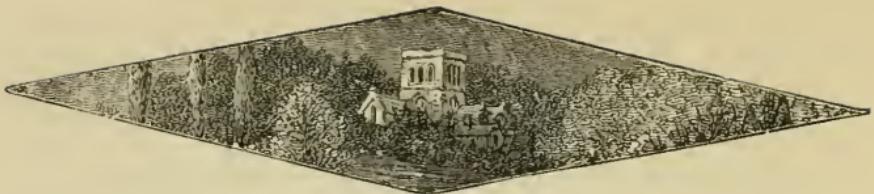
Yes, I knew it! The inner envelope was covered with Australian post-marks, and, ignorant as I might be of its contents, I was raising it to my lips to cover it with passionate kisses, when I saw it was open.

Then a mist came over my mental vision for a time, but only to clear away as, half stupefied, I turned the missive over and over, held it straight for a moment; and then, with a sigh of misery and despair, I stood mute, and as if turned to stone.

“Grace, my child! In mercy’s name tell me——”

It was Madame, who passed her arm round me, and looked horror-stricken at my white face and lips. The next moment I dimly remember she had caught the letter—his letter—my letter—from my hand, and read it aloud: “Mr. John Braywood, Markboro, R. County Melbourne,” and then, in her excitement, the great official sentence-like brand upon it—“Dead!”





CHAPTER II.

THE SORROWS OF MADAME GRAINGER.



I TRIED so hard to bear up, to keep secret my loss, but it was all in vain. My long days of waiting for that answer had weakened and undermined my constitution, so that I had not strength to bear up against the shock, and the result was a very serious illness during which I was given over by the doctors, but

somehow they were wrong. The change was long in coming, but it came, and by degrees I was convalescent, but only the shadow of my former self.

Poor Madame, as we always called her, the French title as she laughingly used to tell me, bringing her ten times as many customers as would have fallen to her lot had she called herself Mrs. Grainger, she tended me through my long illness as if she had been my mother, and I believe she loved me dearly. At times

I had hinted at being sent away ; at the expense and trouble I must be, but she used to lay her hand upon my lips and kiss my forehead.

“Don’t be silly, my child,” she said. “You know I make money fast, and how could I spend what little you cost better than in taking care of you.

“Grace, my child,” she said one night, after a feeble protest on my part, “sorrow brings people closer together. You are a widow now like I am, although you never were a wife. We two, my dear, must never part.”

I could only kiss her hand and cry silently, as I lay back in my easy chair, thankful that if I could live my lot would be made less hard to bear. For all through my weak and weary illness, when I was not thinking of dear Jack, the thought that I must be up and doing was for ever intruding itself, and that thought of going out to battle with the world once more seemed to keep me back.

I need not have troubled about my future, for that was to be my home. With returning health came greater intimacy, and by degrees I learned that Madame Grainger’s troubles had been greater, perhaps, than mine, for after a brief spell of married happiness her husband, a clergyman, had succumbed to poverty and overwork, leaving her almost penniless, to drift at last into the life she had led and become a busy thriving woman.

“Yes,” she said to me more than once, “I have often regretted the society in which I used to move, but it is better to depend upon oneself, Grace, than to be a burden upon one’s friends. I offended many by taking to this life, but I should have ceased to respect myself had I remained a poverty-stricken widow existing on

the charity of those who blame me the most for my course."

" You must have had a hard fight," I said.

" I did, my child," she replied, " a very hard fight, and it was at a time when I used to think that it would have been better to have lain down and died, as just one year before, my poor husband had closed his eyes."

" How well I can recall it all," she said dreamily, " long as it is ago. You told me your little life Grace, let me tell you mine. Did I ever say to you that Mr. Grainger was a clergyman"?

" Yes," I said, watching her intently, " you told me so."

" Poor fellow!" she said with a sigh, " he asked me quite suddenly one day to be his wife.

" I was astounded, and yet pleased, and in a moment I had said quietly that it was impossible.

" Mr. Grainger rose from his seat, looking inexpressibly pained, and walked slowly up and down the room, while I sat back in my chair by the window, with my heart beating violently, and a sense of suffocation upon me that was absolutely painful. But I was pained, too, for him: grieved that he should ever have asked me—more than grieved to have caused him sorrow. For in his suffering he looked so calm and gentle—he, the tall, stalwart man, with his fast-greying hair, and countenance marked with the lines printed by maturing age and thought. He had been so kind and friendly, too, ever since he had been at the parsonage, and in our daily work we had been drawn so imperceptibly together, that I had hoped ours was to be a firm and lasting friendship; and now this meeting seemed to have brought it to an abrupt conclusion. Suddenly he

stopped before me again, and stood looking down, while I crouched there almost fascinated by his gaze.

“ ‘ Miss Denison—Laura,’ he said, in a low soft voice, ‘ you must forgive me, and if you cannot accede to my proposal, let us be as we have been during the past happy year.’

‘ I tried to speak, but he held up his hand.

“ ‘ Hear me out, dear friend,’ he said, ‘ and let me speak again, for I still hope that I may have taken you by surprise. I have known you now for a year.’

“ I tried to speak once more—to beg of him that he would let me leave the room—that he would bring our interview to an end; but my heart went on still with its heavy beat, and the suffocating sensation was still at my throat, so that I half lay there with my eyes closed, listening to his words, every one of which seemed to wake an echo, and increase the heavy throbbing of my heart.

“ ‘ I had a love-dream once,’ he said; and his voice became very rich and soft. ‘ I was tutor in a noble house. There was a daughter there whom I could have loved, had I but dared. Honour, position, all forbade it. She was heiress to thirty thousand pounds, and I was the young tutor to whose care the education of her brother had been trusted. She never knew my fancy, and I saw her married to a nobleman—happily, I hoped—while I—I returned to my books.’

“ He paused again, and I sat up watching his half-averted face, as in those few words—so few but so pregnant of meaning—he laid bare to me his heart; and as he sighed, the heavy throbbing in my breast began to subside, and a strange feeling of pity for him to grow.

“‘ I thought it but fair to tell you this,’ he said sadly, ‘ to show you that I have no youthful first love to lay before you ; but I felt that here, in this village, if your lot were joined to mine, the down-hill of life would be made happy for me, as God knows I would try to make it ever green and pleasant for you, while those around us should be taught to bless us for the help we gave. It is no romantic offer,’ he said, more cheerfully. ‘ It is very matter-of-fact, I know, but it was upon these grounds, dear friend, that I asked you to be my wife.’

“ He looked down at me once again, and as our eyes met, something within me seemed to say, ‘ Withdraw your refusal, and lay those trembling hands in his, for he is a man that you could love.’ But I only shook my head sadly, as I murmured—

“‘ No, it could never be ! ’

“‘ You are agitated,’ he said tenderly, as he took my hand and reverently kissed it. I will leave you now. Mine is too solemn a proposal for us both to be replied to without consideration. Let all be as it was for a month, and then I will renew my suit. If, after this lapse of time, you shall think as you do now, believe me, I will never pain the woman whom I hope to retain as my best and dearest friend, by the faintest allusion to that which we will agree to bury in the past.’

“‘ No,’ I said, with a firmness which surprised myself. ‘ Stay Mr. Grainger. Let me speak.’

“ He bowed his head in his old pleasant manner and took his seat once more.

“‘ I must undeceive you now—at once,’ I faltered. ‘ It would be cruel to you—to us both, to let this rest only to be renewed at the month’s end.’

“ He bowed his head still lower, and my heart gave a throb of gratitude as I saw the tender consideration with which he averted his gaze from my agitated face.

“ There was again a terrible silence in the room, broken only by the distant murmur of the sunlit sea, as it broke upon the fine shingle three hundred feet below. There was a soft rustle, too, amongst the leaves around the window, and—I remember it so well—the pale pink petals of a rose kept falling slowly, fluttering down like the withered hopes of my past sad life, as I struggled hard for the calmness that should enable me to speak.

“ There was no other man living to whom I could have made this confession, and not even to him an hour before; but after the way in which he had bared the secrets of his own heart to my gaze, a bond of sympathy seemed to have joined us, and something within me forced me to speak—agitatedly at first, but with a growing calmness, that was even piteous to me, as I seemed to listen to my own words, and once more grieved over my sorrows, as if they had been those of another.

“ ‘ Ten years ago,’ I said, ‘ when I was in my nineteenth year, my mother in her widowhood and sorrow took this quiet cottage by the sea, to end her days in calmness and repose.’

“ ‘ Yes,’ he said, ‘ I know, she died two years ago, beloved by all.’ This in a tone of sympathy that seemed to give me strength.

“ ‘ When we first came, we found that there were frequent mistakes made, for at the great house there was another family named Denison, and little confusions arose about our letters.’

“ ‘Yes, I have heard of them,’ he said pleasantly. ‘I have studied up the past history of the village. They were very wealthy, and there was a beautiful daughter, an heiress.’

“ ‘Yes,’ I said, ‘you are quite right, she was very beautiful and very rich. She used to call on me, and we were very friendly, for she was not spoiled by her position, and would have been my inseparable companion but for the duties I owed to my mother.

“ As it was, we used to sit for hours in the nooks of the cliff, reading, or she would spend her evenings at the cottage, till Mr. Denison fetched her himself, and playfully bantered me, telling me how jealous he was of her affection for the cottage and its occupants.

“ Those were very bright and happy days, and the Isle seemed to us both a very Eden, though it is as beauteous now as it was then. But our dream was to be broken, for in consequence of Mr. Denison’s failing health, their medical men ordered a change to a more bracing atmosphere, and the family left to spend a few months in Scotland.

“ On the morning when I parted from Julia, I was so low-spirited that it was hard work to keep back my tears; but I fought with my folly, and getting the better of my trouble, I took some work and a book to go along the cliff path, and sit in one of our favourite nooks far above the sea.

“ It was a dangerous place, inasmuch as the way was along a narrow sheep-track, and the slope down to the beach was very steep; but we were so accustomed to the giddy cliffs that the idea of danger never crossed our minds any more than it did those of the village children, who would run along the edges or scramble

down the rock-face where there seemed hardly foot-hold for a goat.

“I suppose I must have been there about two hours, not reading or working, but thinking of how long the time would be before Julia Denison returned, and there I sat watching the passing vessels far out on the blue water where it seemed to melt into the sky.

“My musing came to a sudden end, for I felt that it was neglectful of me to stay away so long, and I began to hurry back.

“To reach the road above, after climbing a zig-zag path, I had to pass round a bold bluff of chalky rock which projected from the cliff, and effectually concealed the path on the other side.

“I was so used to the way that I almost ran round, when to my horror and astonishment I came roughly in contact with a gentleman walking in the opposite direction.

“I hardly know how it occurred, but partly from the collision, partly in consequence of my hasty step back, my foot slipped over the edge of the path, the crumbling stones gave way, and I fell.

“It would have been no very terrible fall, only a severe scratching and a sprain, for the cliff there was only a steep slope; but I was saved by the gentleman catching my wrist, and at the expense of a severe wrench, dragging me back to the path; and before I could recover from the surprise and the sick faint feeling that came over me, he was carrying me along the path to a grassy slope, where he tenderly laid me down, and poured between my lips a few drops of spirit from a flask.

“‘Lie still,’ he said, in a low, sympathetic voice. ‘Thank Heaven, my poor child, you are safe !’

“There was such a tone of command in his voice, and he seemed to imply that I had been saved from such a terrible danger, that in my weak state I accepted it all, and with a girl’s romantic folly began to feel gratitude to my preserver, as I lay there blushingly glancing at the handsome face so full of solicitude that was hanging over me.

“There was something in his words that went to my heart every time he spoke, and at his wish I did not attempt to move for some time, till he yielded to my solicitations, and agreed that I was sufficiently recovered to walk home.

“‘You are more hurt than you think, you brave little woman,’ he said tenderly. ‘There take my arm and I will see you home.’

“‘Indeed I can walk,’ I said, but a faint cry of pain escaped me as I tried, for my ankle was slightly sprained, and I was glad to lean upon him, and accept his escort home.

“‘Am I right in thinking I am speaking to Miss Denison ?’ he said on the way.

“‘Yes,’ I said, surprised at the knowledge on the part of a stranger; ‘but how did you know ?’

“‘Know !’ he said laughing; ‘did you suppose that in this little Isle of Wight a beautiful flower could blossom without its fame reaching through its length and breadth ?’

“I started, hardly knowing whether to feel pleased or annoyed, and my replies were in monosyllables, till we reached the cottage, greatly to mamma’s surprise and alarm. Here, with the most gentlemanly consider-

ation, my companion took his leave, and I was helped to the sofa, where my little sprains were seen to, and the pain soon forgotten.

“ Recollect I was but nineteen, and such attentions were quite new to me. I think, then, I may be excused for listening the next day with fluttering pulses to a voice that I heard through the open window, inquiring after my health ; then feeling something very near akin to pain as I heard the retiring footsteps ; while when mamma took from the servant a card and read aloud, ‘ Captain Hansleigh, Raypark Barracks,’ a vivid blush overspread my cheeks, only to deepen as I caught her searching gaze and heard her sigh.

“ I know now how foolish I was to let my weak young heart go forth to the first fowler that laid for it his snares, but I was innocent and unskilled then. I was but a girl in ways and thoughts, and the brave, handsome young officer, who had been in India, and bore a scar upon his forehead, made the poor weak heart beat whenever he approached. For what was I—was my argument—that this man, who could pick and choose in society, should be ever coming over to our cottage to seek me out ?

“ Then I was, as I said, but young and vain, and in a few short weeks Julia was almost forgotten in this new, strange, wondrous feeling of love.”

Mr. Grange’s head went down upon his hand, but I hardly noticed it as I proceeded, wound up now by a strange desire to tell him all, even though my heart was torn by the old recollections that were so vivid as I recalled them from the past.

“ Captain Hansleigh was constantly calling. His manner won mamma to his side, and at last he told her

that he was but a poor officer who loved his profession and hoped to rise, as he begged her leave to tell me how he loved me.

“How he loved me ! He had already told me a score of times, and I, weak child, believed and loved again with all my fond young heart, sitting day after day book in hand, pretending to read, but understanding never a word, as I listened by the open window for the easy, careless step on the gravel beneath the vine-clad verandah, till he came by in his easy *nonchalant* way, perhaps pretending not to see me as he passed on towards the door.

“I used to think afterwards that what befel me was a punishment for my selfish happiness. For I was happy then, listening to the music of his words, while we wandered along the cliff. The sea with its rich deep undertones seemed to sing of endless love and joy; there was music in the very air, sweet music that filled my heart with delight, and I was blind to all else but the one belief that I breathed in thankfulness with my prayers from my knees at night, again as my eyes unclosed to the bright morning, and felt ever beating in every throb of my pulses—‘He loves me ! he loves me ! he loves me !’

“Three months fled like magic, and still my dream was unbroken. He had left me, as he won from me my confession that I would be his, and his alone—that I loved him with all my heart—and then I had in the sorrow of my parting gone down upon my knees, to thank God for giving me the love of that great, strong, brave man.

“His regiment was called away to another part, but he had said that he would be always near in thought,

and had questioned me about our family, and papa, who had died so suddenly ; though I did not think it was strange then, and the recollection of it all did not come to me till long afterwards.

“ His head-quarters were two hundred miles away ; but letters would constantly be passing to and fro, and as soon as the bitterness of the parting was over I began to look forward to our next meeting, and to write down my loving thoughts ; besides which, I felt how neglectful I had of late been towards mamma and my ordinary duties. I redoubled then my efforts, and in these busy occupations the time glided on.

“ I wrote almost daily, covering page after page with my fond happiness, feeling disappointed that the replies were few and short, but reading the words and investing them with rainbow hues, as I treasured each expression of fondness, and excused him on the score of his military duties. ‘ And besides,’ I said, ‘ men never write as a woman does ; it is not right they should.’

“ It was long before distrust crept into the heart so full of love. There was no room for other than loyal thoughts. Letters grew fewer and more brief, but there were always excuses ready, and I wrote to him the more. But at last constant sapping began to undermine, and though I fought long and hard, till my cheek was sunken and pale with my sleepless nights, distrust and doubt carried the citadel one day, when I had written many letters in a month, and only had one brief reply, telling me in answer to my agonized inquiries that he was quite well, but busy. Those two enemies to my peace carried the citadel at last, for the question now in my mind was—‘ Does he love me ? ’

“I could not bear it at first, and an agonizing week passed by, during which I wrote to him again, and then again, imploring him to come to me if he could, or else to write to me at length, or my heart would break.

“Another week of misery passed away, during which my heart seemed to sink and wither, while the fount of my tears, long since drained, dried up. I went about the place like a ghost, or sat watching the lane through which the postman came.

“At last a letter; I knew that there was one, for seeing me at the window, instead of looking another way as had been his custom of late, as soon as he came in sight the postman gave me a friendly nod, and the next moment waved a letter in the air.

“I darted out to meet him, with feverish haste, caught the letter from him, and saw that it was in the well-known hand. My mother was in the passage as I rushed in.

“‘From Arthur, mamma, from Arthur!’ I panted joyously, and I hurried into the little parlour, kissing the paper with delight, as I told myself that here was balm for my sore aching heart—and then a strange fit of trembling came over me, and I felt cold and as if seized by a chill.

“I did not dare for a time to open my letter, but at last with my eyes dim, and dread feeling of sickness upon me, I made the effort and tore open the envelope. How my thin white fingers trembled as I took out the enclosure! But my strength came back with the effort I made, and I read the few lines it contained in the midst of what seemed to be a deadly calm, wherein feeling and sound were frozen up, and I was as it were alone.

“ The words were very few, saying in measured terms that it would be better that the engagement should be at an end, for it had been commenced in error, and could never end in happiness for me. In short, he had during his absence tried his heart and found that he did not love me as it would be his duty, and therefore the present course would be the best for both.

“ I remember that I gave a hysterical laugh as I finished the heartless lines, and then I mocked at myself. But that hard feeling passed away, and I sank down by the window softened—broken—and as my head went down upon my hand, I asked for help to bear the bitter, bitter blow that had bruised and beaten me to the earth.

“ I fell into a dreamy state then, from which I was aroused by my poor mother, who came and knelt beside me. I was quite calm, and placed the letter in her hands with a sad smile, rising when she had read it, and kissing her before sitting down and taking up my work.

“ I was not ill, but for the next month seemed dull and stunned, trying to bear all patiently; the greatest pang being when I heard from Julia Denison that the error of Captain Hanleigh had been that he had mistaken me for the heiress, to whom he afterwards proposed, and was indignantly refused.”

“ That is my story, Mr. Grange,” I said, rising and standing flushed and trembling before the second suitor of my bitter life. “ It was right that you should know; and now, good-bye ! ”

The strength that had sustained me through my

narrative was fleeting fast, and my heart had resumed its painful throbings, as he stood before me and took my hand.

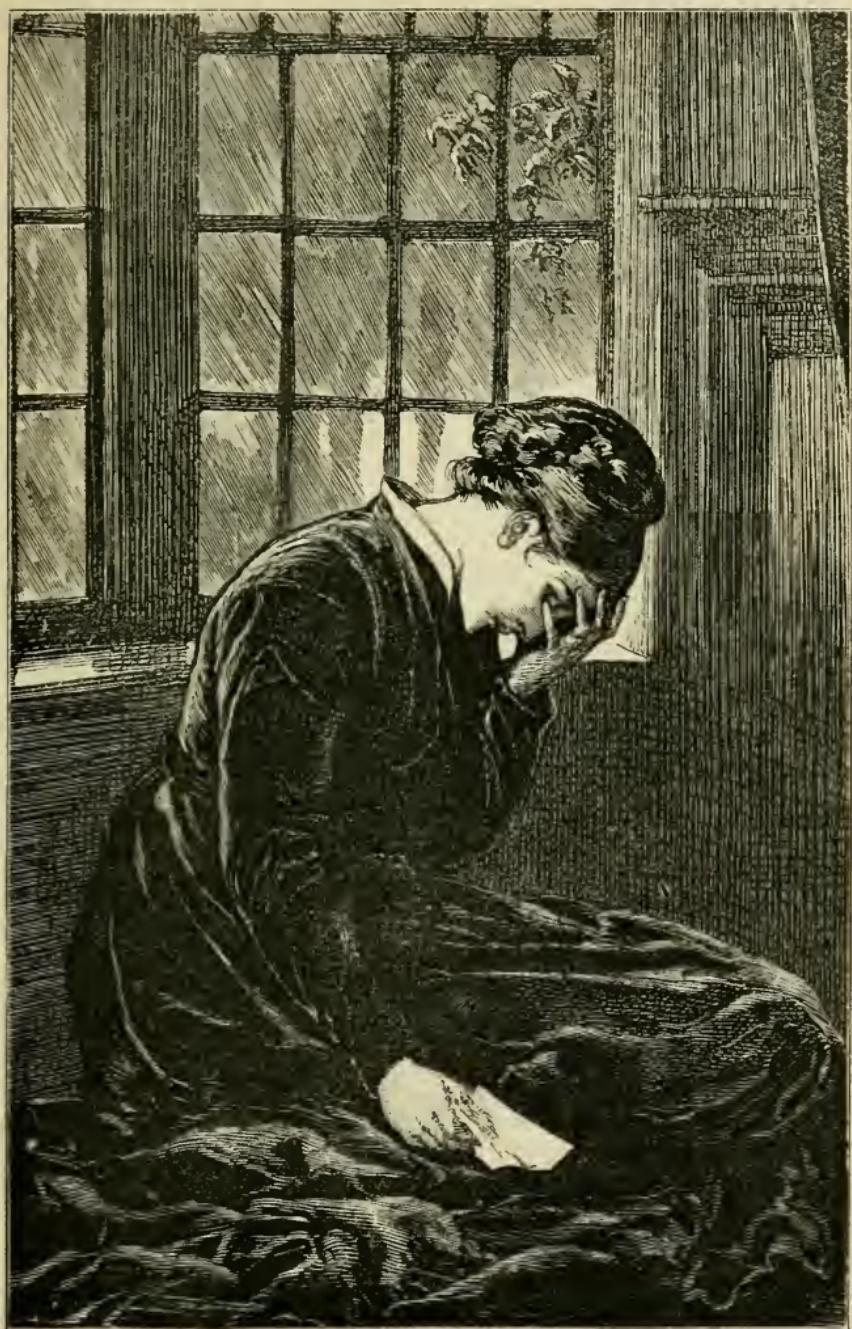
“I knew that there must have been some terrible grief,” he said in a low voice full of emotion; “but, Laura, can you tell me truly, for your own future happiness, and for mine, that this gentle heart can never love again?”

A thousand thoughts flashed through my mind of endless loving-kindness, of gentleness to the suffering, of watchful nights by sick couches, of the many acts of this man for whom the deadliest diseases had no terror even when others fled. I knew him to be the soul of truth and honour, and he had told me of his love. Could I then say that this heart could never love again, when in spite of sadness, sorrow, and the past, it had leapt to him even as it had leapt once before? I struggled hard asking myself if this was not self-deceit, but there was none, and I knew that if I said no it would be a lie.

He saw it all and knew, for a calm sweet smile of ineffable joy overspread his face, and the next moment I was sobbing gently on his breast.

“My dream of happiness was more than fulfilled, Grace,” continued Madame Grainger, “but it was too joyous to last. Two years glided away and then I was alone once more with a future before me that was one weary blank. Ah! Grace, how little the world knows of others’ sorrows, and what histories are hidden often behind a smiling face.”





"I ASKED FOR HELP TO BEAR THE BITTER BLOW"—(see p. 31).



CHAPTER III.

MY LITTLE HERO.



IT was not long after that Madame Grainger gave up business on account of her ill-health, and the kindness she had rendered to me I was able to return, nursing her constantly, till one sad day when I found myself alone—a very dear friend had passed away, almost her last coherent words being an assurance that I was beyond want; and

so I afterwards found when her solicitors told me that she had left me all of which she died possessed.

It was some time before I could realize the fact that I possessed an independence; and at times I hesitated as to whether I should not refuse to accept what was to me a fortune, but a little consideration showed me how I could be, as it were, the steward of that which I held in trust, and there were plenty of ways in which I might dispense help to those around.

One of my first friends who seemed to ask was little Bill, a boy I used to meet in my visits to the solicitor's in the City. He was a diminutive, sharp-faced boy, carrying a bit of stick covered with india rubber rings, which, in a shrill, piping voice, he called at a penny a dozen.

I knew Bill, not personally, but well ; and for quite two years we had often encountered, and sometimes done a little business together. For Bill had not always sold india-rubber rings, but was engaged in a good many commercial transactions in our big city, while trying very hard to solve that most difficult of problems : Given a mouth : how to fill it. It was Bill who used to shriek after me, "Box o' lyats," and would not believe that I never smoked and had no use for the cascarilla scented vesuvians. It was Bill who used to make me nervous to see him in front of the Mansion House at three o'clock of an afternoon, paddling bare-footed in and out of coach, carriage, cab, and 'bus, like a muddy imp ; now under a wheel almost, now amongst the horses' legs, now nearly run over, and taking it as a matter of course ; but ever fearless and busy, darting in and out to vend the newspapers beneath his arm.

Up on 'bus steps, beside Hansoms, splashed, earnest, and busy, it was Bill that was eagerly seeking to earn the universal penny—that foundation of fortunes. It was Bill that set up an opposition box, and shrieked, "Clean yer boots, sir. Hey, ear yer are, sir," till the competition and ferocity of the brigade proved too much for him. It was Bill who used to run about with three oranges in his hand till they were sold for a penny. In short, it was Bill, who puzzled me to count up the sum of his commercial transactions, or the many

phases in which he had presented himself to my notice.

Yes, we were old friends, Bill and I, and to do him justice, I never saw the boy idle. An old-fashioned boy was he—quite a man in his way. Used to knocking about, and being knocked about in the streets, his experience of London life was something startling. Living so much in the mud and amongst the dregs of our busy city, he always reminded me of an eel, and well he acted up to his part—little, lissome, and quick, he would wind in and out of a crowd, no matter how dense, and somehow or another Bill grew to be one of the “common objects of the shore” of that busy sea of life—London.

A quiet, earnest, pale face, sharp, dark eyes, and an old, careworn look, that seemed to whisper of the pinchings of hunger, while—yes, there certainly was more dirt than looked good for him.

I had dealt with little Bill several times before we became intimate enough for questioning, but at last, after a purchase, I asked him where he lived.

“Down by Brick Lane, mum, and mother does mangling. Three brothers and two sisters, and they’re all younger nor me. I’m the only one as goes out to work.”

“And what does your father do?” I asked.

“Father, mum? Ah, he’s dead, mum. Fell off a scuffle, and they took him to the ’osspital, where mother and me used to go to see him till one day, when I had to take mother back, for she said she was blind, and held her head down and kept her hands over her face till I got her home, when she did nothing but cry for three days. It was then as mother got the

mangle, and Tommy and Sam helps turn, only they're such little chaps, and don't do much good. I always turns when I gets home o' nights, and have had my tea, and that's after I've done selling the papers."

"I've got my living for three years now, and never makes less than sixpence a day, and sometimes I've cleared a shilling; and mother says it's so useful, for the t'others eat so much bread that a quartern loaf's gone directly. But mother says she reckons that what I bring home always pays the rent and keeps me—which helps, you know."

And this was all said with such a quiet ease, free from want or desire to show up the family troubles to a stranger: though being perhaps something more, almost one of a familiar face, Bill did not scruple to talk of the family affairs and his own prospects.

"I'm going to have a barrer some day, when I gets big enough to manage one. That's a fine trade, you know; selling all them beautiful fruits round about the 'Change—waiting and stopping when you gets a chance, for the pleace won't let you stay anywhere. There's Harry Sanders makes ever so much, only he's a big married man, wife and two little 'uns and a dawg. Sometimes it's pineapples his barrer's full off, then it's cherries, or plums, or peaches, or apples, or pears; at early times, strawberries or sparrowgrass, and all done up nicely in baskets or bundles, so as the big City gents will buy them to take home down in the country. But mother says I must wait ever so long yet, 'cos I'm so little for my age."

"Might I come and see you, Bill?" I asked.

"You can cum if you like mum, only our room ain't werry comfortable, and the mangle skreeks so, whilst

the two littlest often cries a deal, and makes a noise because Sally don't mind 'em well. How old is she ? Oh, Sally's six, only she ain't a useful gal, and always was fond of slipping out and playing in the court with the other gals and boys, as always comes up to play because there's no carts and 'busses coming by. You'll come some day, then, mum ? Don't you go when I ain't at home. Good-bye, mum. Don't want another indy-rubber ring, do you ? ”

Another day and I was looking out near the Mansion House for my little hero, when my heart sank at the sight of a gathering crowd, generally a danger signal, in that busy way.

“ What's the matter, my man ? ”

“ Matter ? Why it's a wonder it don't happen five hundred times a day. That's what it is—a runnin', an' a dodgin', an' a bobbin' about in amongst the 'osses' feet, and a gettin' runned over, as a matter o' course, at last.”

Yes, at last, as I found on elbowing my way through the gaping crowd, feasting their eyes upon the sight of a little muddied bundle of clothes, above which appeared a little, old-looking, scared, quivering, and painwrung countenance, while two muddy hands tightly clutched a dirty parcel of evening papers to his breast.

“ He ain't much hurt, bless you,” said a policeman. “ You're all right, ain't yer, old man ? Now then, try and get on yer legs.”

The little muddy object stared wildly round at the many faces, and his lips moved, but no sound came ; while as the policeman tried to lift him up, a low, sobbing, heartwrung cry came from the poor child's breast, and drew a compassionate murmur from the crowd.

"It's them Hansoms, you see," said a man beside me; "they cuts along full roosh; and one of 'em caught the poor little chap, threw him down, and the wheel went right over him."

"Well, where does it hurt, eh?" said the policeman, not unkindly.

The dim eyes were turned up to the speaker; the papers clutched tightly to the muddy breast; the poor child's lip quivered for a moment, and then Nature was kind to the little sufferer, and he fainted.

"Fetch a cab," I said, kneeling down beside the little fellow, and gently touching the leg which showed the mark of the cab wheel.

"Is it broke, mum?" said the policeman.

I nodded; the cab came up; and there, with the little fellow supported between us, the policeman and I were rumbling over the stones, and on our way to Guy's Hospital. But it is no such easy task to make your way amidst the dense throng of vehicles crowding the bridge, and some time elapsed—time enough for the poor boy to revive a bit, and look about him in a confused, half-stunned way, as if not able to realize his position. At last he spoke:

"I hadn't sold 'arf of 'em," he cried, looking at his dirty newspapers, "and no one won't buy 'em, now;" when the mental pain proved harder to bear than the bodily, and the boy began to cry.

"There, don't do that," said the policeman; "that won't do no good. But here we are."

"Does it hurt you much, Bill?" I said gently, and the boy looked wonderingly at me, as if asking how I knew his name.

"Not so worry much," he said, with the bottom lip

still quivering ; " but mother will be in such a way. Don't let them hurt me any more."

Bore it like a hero he did, and then I left him bright and cheerful, asking a nurse how long it would be before he could run again and sell his papers, while to me he said : " Tell her it ain't bad, mum please, and that she ain't to cry much, and as soon as I get better I'll sell twice as many papers to make up for it ; and you'll give her that sixpence I took out of my trousers, and I think I must have lost a penny when I got—knock—knock"—

The quivering of the lip began once more, for the recollection of the accident was too strong for the little fellow's fortitude, and soon after I was once more amongst the hurrying footsteps on my way to execute my sorrowful commission by Brick Lane.

A thickly-inhabited part—thickly inhabited by our poorer brethren, by disease engendering smells, by fogs, by smoke, by misery and wretchedness unutterable. Dirty butchers' shops, dirty bakers' shops, open shops where wretched vegetables are vended, shops for sheep's heads and faggots, tripe and sausage shops, brokers' so replete with dirty, time-worn furniture that chairs and tables and stump bedsteads are belched forth upon the narrow pave. Here was a chair with a crick in its back, there a lame table ; higher up a cracked looking-glass, while lower down was a wash-tub and four rusty flat-irons. Great Eastern carts and waggons were blocking the way, and now and then side streets revealed the busy mysteries of the goods department. Now I put my foot into an old iron tray full of rusty keys. Extricating myself, I kicked against some jangling iron work, and then hurried on past the shop where

the best price was given for old bones ; and now I came to a small red board, hung by a string to the bolt of a parlour window-shutter. There was a painting in yellow upon the board—a painting of a very gouty-legged, heavy-bodied mangle ; while beneath it was the legend :—

“ MANGLING DONE HERE.”

At the door a bottomless chair was laid sideways to restrain the inquiring dispositions of a treacly-faced child, playing with an old brass candlestick, which it ever and anon sucked with great apparent relish ; while upon my knocking loudly, the child howled furiously until a woman, with crimply white hands and steaming, soap-suddy arms, made her appearance.

“ Does Mrs. Perks reside here ? ” I said.

“ Oh, bother ; no, she don’t,” was the answer ; and then I stood alone.

I was wrong, for I had evidently hit upon a rival establishment where mangling was done ; but a little more searching brought me to where I could hear the creaking and groaning of the stone-burdened machine as it slowly rolled backwards and forwards in sight of the passer-by, and I soon had a pale-face, clean-looking window sobbing bitterly as I told of the mishap.

“ But you’re not deceiving of me ; he’s not worse than you say ? Oh, my poor, poor boy ! ”

There was the mother spoke in those last words—the mother’s heart asserting itself, and showing that the love of the poorest and most uneducated is, after all, but the same as may be found amongst the greatest of our land.

“ You see, he is so good, and old, and kind, and earns

so much, that since my poor husband died he's been such a stay. And now for him, too, to be in a 'ossptial it does seem so hard! I can't help taking on a bit, about it; for he never seemed like other boys, playing and liking to run about the streets; for all he thinks about is to earn money and bring it home. Once he brought me five shillings and three-pence halfpenny in one week, as much as I can make myself some times with the mangle; and then, poor boy, he'd pull off his jacket and wet soppy boots, and turn away at that handle, after tramping about through the cold muddy streets all day. He's never tired, he says, and he lights my bit of fire of a morning, and helps wash his brothers, and now—oh! what shall I do?"

But the thought of her boy's suffering made the poor woman dry her eyes, and by the time she was composed we were back again in the street where Guy's Hospital stands, and then, after muttering a hope that Sammy would mind his brother Pete didn't set his pinafore a fire, the mother entered the building, and we parted.

"And how's the leg, Bill?" I asked him some time later.

"A'most well, mum, ony I can't get it quite straight yet, being a bit drawn; but it never hurts now."

"Down by Brick Lane still?"

"No, ma'am; mother lives close by Camberwell, in one o' them streets out o' Walworth Road, and does clear starching now; and as soon as the leg gets quite well I'm agoing to have a barrer."

But his ambition was never gratified, for soon after the little hero was in a respectable situation and doing well.



CHAPTER IV.

A MORNING WITH MISERY.



I GIVE these as so many random recollections of my life or narratives related to me from time to time, and I have, as being more in keeping with the mood in which they are written, naturally given prominence to those which lean towards the sad and pathetic side of life. My dealings with little Bill encouraged me to visit here and there in the poorer portions of London,

don, at first in fear and trembling, for the rougher men that hung about the entrances to the courts and often blocked the way inspired me with horror and dread, but somehow before long I found that I had become known, and I and my basket were welcome visitors in many a dark home, and at last I had no hesitation in penetrating the worst portions of that doleful district,

back of Drury Lane and the portion swept away to make room for the Courts of Justice.

I remember well one morning that I had with misery in its haunts and my search for a house of whose occupants I had been told. I had been considering for some few minutes rather at fault, when I came upon a group of boys engaged in a game of buttons upon the pavement, and my inquiring for Burt's Buildings created quite a little scene of excitement.

"Burt's Buildings, ma'am?" said one, as all rose to stare at me. "It's first turning to the left after you gets down Popper's Court."

"No tain't now," cried another, "you let me tell the lady. It's the first turning to the left past old Blacke's where the lamp hangs as Jim Pikehurst broke; and then you goes—."

"No you don't ma'am, it's up this way, ma'am. He means Burt's Court, where they're pulling down. I'll show you ma'am."

"But are you sure you know?" I said.

"No, ma'am," cried half-a-dozen in chorus, "he don't know, ma'am, not a bit."

Here there was a threatening gesture from my would be guide, and a defiant war-whoop in reply, but uttered in retreat, and the next minute I was standing amongst the rags of one of the inns of court, in company with a little sallow skinned boy about ten, dressed in a great deal of trousers and very little shirt. The weather being warm, this completed his costume, if I except the dirt with which he was largely decorated.

In company with a similarly costumed boy of his own age, he was now making a light repast off a piece of black, gristly stuff which they called "fungus;"

but whose odour announced it to be the composition of glue and treacle used by printers for their ink-rollers. My boy—that is to say, the one who became my guide—was at the same time forming designs upon the broken pavement by placing one of his bare feet in the black gutter, full of unutterable abominations, and then printing the foot—heel, sole, and toes—upon various dry spots. Now he would contract his toes, now expand them, and then seem to derive much pleasure from making the foul black mud of the gutter ooze up between them in little gushes which met and formed a dirty stream upon his instep.

Whose house did I want? Well, I only wanted leading to the place itself; and after divers wanderings in and out, I stood in Burt's Buildings, and looked about, with more than one curious pair of eyes watching me. On my right were a couple of uninhabited tenements—tenements untenable—the grating in front rusty and worn, the walls foul with mud, every window that could be reached by stick or stone broken, every available ledge loaded with an assortment of stones, bones, cabbage-stumps, oyster shells mingled with those of the cockle, periwinkle, and whelk; while the remaining eight or nine houses in the court were at first sight in the same predicament, though the second glance told that all their windows were not broken, while further inspection showed that attempts had been made in a variety of ways to repair the breaches made by time and the smaller builders of the place. Paper seemed much in favour in some sashes; wood and pieces of slate in others; one gashly breach was stopped by an old rusty tea tray, which well covered four broken squares; while rags, straw, and a variety of articles

which would have required analyzation to catalogue, displayed themselves obtrusively at every turn.

By slow degrees little signs showed that, although the inhabitants presented themselves but little, yet there were dwellers here. At one window a bright red and yellow tulip grew in an old black teapot, whose nose and handle evidently helped to form the rubbish heap down one of the gratings. At another window there was a small bird-cage—such a small cage for the restless linnet within, which breasted the wires incessantly, ever twittering and bringing thoughts of far-off blue-arched campaigns, where the trees were delicate with their bright golden green, and the emerald turf was spangled with the flowers of spring. Again, at another window, two or three articles of washed clothing had been hung out to dry, and secured by shutting the window down upon them. While the next instant came a whoop and a yell, and a troop of children swept back into the before silent court, from which they had evidently been drawn by some foreign attraction. The babies were there, tied in the customary drabby, washed-out shawl, swaying in the most top-heavy manner. The mothers were there now, at door and window, to shriek out warning or threat; while now appeared the first male inhabitant in the shape of a closely-cropped man, with a bull head and a black pipe, a villainous countenance, and a little dog which he nursed as he looked out of one of the windows, and stopped at intervals to spit upon one particular broken slab in the court below.

“ This here’s Burt’s Buildings,” said my guide; who then spun the penny I gave him into the air, caught at it, struck it upon the edge, when down it fell, and rolled

to the grating of an empty house and was gone ; but hardly quicker than the little boy had leaped forward and thrown himself down upon his face, to peer between the rusty bars.

Who could have resisted the dismay and misery of that boy's face as he raised it to mine ? or have failed to enjoy the sudden change to hope and delight as the hand which went to a pocket placed another coin in his hand, to send him turning the wheel along the court till he had disappeared ; while half a score of the young builders formed themselves into a committee of inspection, and wedged their noses down between the bars in their endeavour to catch a glimpse of the lost coin.

And now I was at Burt's Buildings, for what had I come, but to see misery ; and I saw her, gaunt, and foul, and wan, looking at me from every landing as I slowly ascended step by step the creaking old stairs, which threatened to give way once and for all beneath my weight, as they hung to the wall, while the balustrade seemed to have disappeared a bit at a time for firewood. I saw misery looking out at me from the dark eyes of a woman, who coughed painfully at intervals, as she told me of how she found bread for herself and three children.

“ It came hard on me, you see, ma'am, when my poor master died. We were out of the country, and come up here for work, and very good work he got till the accident that laid him up for six weeks. Out-patient of the hospital he was, and they were very kind to him ; and though he never took regularly to his bed, he seemed to dwindle away, and he was took. Don't think me hard-hearted because I don't cry about

it, ma'am ; I've cried till the tears seem as if they would not come any more, and what one has to do for a bit of bread is so trying at times that one has no time to be fretting.

" You see, children are so thoughtless, and yet you can't wonder at it—but as long as they have their meal's victuals that's all they think about. But then they're very young, you see, and don't know any better. That big one's seven, and she minds the two others while I go out, and I always manage not to be gone more than three hours at a time, though it hinders me a good deal from taking longer beats, for you see I'm out now-a-days in this pleasant spring weather with flowers. I'd do needlework, so as to be at home with them, but, oh ! it's heartbreaking work. It was hard enough, I dare say, before there were sewing machines, but it's dreadful now, and you may work day and night almost to live. Just fancy being paid so many farthings for making a garment that has taken hours, while the poor children have been fretful and miserably cooped up in this one room—half-a-crown a week I pay for it, because it's one of the most decent, and I like being up at the top of the house, here, for one seems to get a little more fresh air, even if it's smoky. The poor bairns didn't seem to breathe down below there, and grew more white and pasty-looking every day till I got them up here.

" I'm not particular what I sell as long as it is in season and people will buy. But it's no matter what one takes to, there's scores about selling the very same thing, and it's quite a fight sometimes for the next penny. Flowers always did, and I suppose always will, sell well, and I do the best I can with mine by sprinkling

and keeping them fresh, and setting them out as tasty as I can, so as to catch people's eyes. There's very few people, no matter how hard they are, but what you can make the way to their hearts with a pretty, sweet-smelling blossom or two. I suppose as God made them, He's given them that power, and I've had your hard City men, who make money all the day long, stop in front of my basket with the lines softening out of their faces, and a brightness coming into their eyes that seems to stop for long enough ; and if they buy, say, a bunch of violets or a few wallflowers, they'll stop about them, not picking and choosing and beating you down, but pretending to, so that they may hang about the basket, and smell them, and look at their simple beauty.

“ I keep at flowers all I can, for it's a good trade for a poor woman like me ; and even in that one gets one's regular customers. One simple-looking boy comes and buys rosebuds of me ; and I smile to myself, sadly enough though, for it reminds me of old times, when one's eyes were bright, and one's face was smooth and fresh-coloured, and Tom used to say—Well, never mind, ma'am, I won't bother you with that nonsense ; but this customer of mine buys those rosebuds to give to some proud girl, I feel sure—one as will never look at him ; and the poor fellow always sighs when he buys his roses. One gentleman buys a bunch regularly to take home to his wife ; another for his children ; and workgirls love them dearly, to keep them in water in their rooms. I call regular at one house, and somehow I always make up my best bunch for there. You see, it's for a sick girl who has been lying months and months, and they tell me she will never get better ;

while the thought of her seems to remind me of my own trouble, and I feel sorry for her; and after the servant has taken the sweet, fresh bunch, and paid me for it, I seem to picture it all—the poor invalid smiling and brightening up at the sight of the pretty flowers, as she holds out her poor, thin, white hands for them, and perhaps kisses them, and holds them to her poor pale face. I don't know that she does—I only seem to fancy it is so.

“Rich and poor, ma'am, all alike, and ready to be customers for a few flowers; and I often felt cut to see the eager looks some poor creatures give at them, and how ready they are to part with almost their last coin to get hold of them. Why, I've known boys who had perhaps a penny to get a bit of bread-and-butter for their tea come and spend it with me; and once, bad off as I was myself, I could not take the longing little fellow's penny, but gave him the flowers.

“You see, it seems to come into the hearts of all God's creatures, I think, to love the bright country; and when tiny bits of it like are held before them, it sets them longing, and makes them eager to get them. But it's hard work at times to know what to do, for flowers fade and die, and after one has come down to the lavender, and cried that round the streets, it's getting a hard matter to know what to sell. I've come home here o' nights before now, and gone down on my knees by that bit of a bed and cried to be taught what to do next to get a bit of bread for the little ones, whom I've found huddled together fast asleep—after crying, perhaps, for long enough because mother did not come home. And shall I tell you why mother did not come home, ma'am? Well, it was because

she had tramped hour after hour, street after street, to find a customer, and then came home disappointed and heart-sick. Then, perhaps it would be the crying, or perhaps better thoughts came into one's ignorant heart ; but I've got up better, and somehow the sun would shine a bit for me the next day, so that I could make a few pence ; and one way and another we manage to live, while others starve."

Was it one's heart that had grown heavier with listening to the widow's sorrows ? Perhaps so ; for certainly the stairs creaked more loudly as I went down past misery staring from more than one lair, hollow-eyed and gaunt, as though speaking as the flower-selling widow ; and then I stood once more in the court, threaded my way past the children that flocked there, several of whom were fishing with bits of string for the lost coin, and, on reaching the *embouchure*, encountered young Trouzers, who grinned a welcome as I passed, and ceased printing black feet upon the pavement.

"I ain't spint that there copper," he shouted after me.

"Haven't you ?" I said. "What shall you do with it, my man ?"

"Give it to mother," said the grimy young rascal, with an earnestness that there was no mistaking ; and I passed on, thinking what a fine lad that little fellow would have made if planted in different soil with some one to carefully watch him and tend.





CHAPTER V.

RUTH'S STEPFATHER.



I FEEL a shrinking—a strange kind of hesitation in narrating some of these adventures lest the reader should think me full of egotism, and that I told of my little charities as if proud of what I had done. Pray chase any such idea from your minds, for I can honestly say that no feeling of vanity ever existed in mine. I am merely relating the pleasures

of my life, my rambles amongst weeds and flowers—the weeds and sad lined blossoms of our town.

I was much troubled in my mind as to how I could most help the widow of Burt's Buildings, and I knew that I could best assist her by helping her to help herself. One of her great troubles was that she had to leave her little ones so long, and a strange sense of pain had shot through me as she spoke of finding them huddled together as they had cried themselves to sleep. What could I do then?

The thought came: A sewing machine! that which had been her enemy to be now her friend; and the

next morning I was in one of our busiest streets in front of a large establishment within whose plate-glass doors I saw a pretty lady-like young woman, busy winding thread upon one of some dozen of the ingenious little pieces of mechanism, and upon stating my wants she led me up to a bluff, sharp-looking, grey man whose face seemed to soften as she spoke before returning to her task.

“ Sewing machine ma’am, eh ? ” he said, eyeing me very sharply. “ Own use ? ”

“ No, ” I said, “ I want it for a poor woman to enable her to earn her living.”

“ Instalments, ma’am, ” he said sharply.

“ I beg your pardon.”

“ Want to pay for it by instalments ? ” he said.

“ Oh ! no, I will pay for it at once, and you can deliver it to her.”

“ Oh, ” he said smiling, “ that’s twenty per cent. dis.”

I looked at him wonderingly, for I did not know what twenty per cent. dis. might be.

“ I always take twenty per cent. discount off these machines, ” he said, and I left pleasurable impressed by his ways and those of the young girl he introduced to me as his daughter, and that little new machine was the first of several in which I had Mr. Smith’s kind co-operation and advice in what were doubtful cases.

The result was a warm intimacy, in the course of which he told me his little history and that of his daughter—stepdaughter he called her—Ruth.

“ Mine’s a curious trade to have taken to, ” he said, “ and I had plenty of up-hill work, but it has grown to be profitable. Things were at a low ebb with me when I took it up, while now—

There, I won't boast, only say that I'm thankful for it. Poverty comes in at the door, and love flies out of the window, so they say; but that's all nonsense, or else your poor people would be always miserable, while according to my experience your poor man is often more lighthearted than the man with thousands.

I was at my wits' end for something to do, and sat nibbling my nails one day, and grumbling horribly.

"Don't go on like that, Tom," says my wife; "things might be worse."

"How?" I said.

"Why, we might have Luke at home, and he is doing well."

Luke's our boy, you know, and we had got him into a merchant's office, where he seemed likely to stay; but I was in a grumbling fit then, and there was a clickety-click noise going on in the next room which fidgeted me terribly.

"Things can't be worse," I said angrily; and I was going to prove myself in the wrong by making my wife cry, when there was a knock at the door.

"Come in," I said, and a fellow-lodger put in his head.

"Are you good at works, Mr. Smith?" he said.

"What works?" I said; "fireworks—gasworks?"

"No, no; I mean works of things as goes with wheels and springs."

"Middling," I said, for I was fond of pulling clocks to pieces, and trying to invent.

"I wish you'd come and look at this sewing machine of mine, for I can't get it to go."

Sewing machines were newish in those days, and I got up to have a look at it, and after about an hour's

fiddling about, I began to see a bit the reason why—the purpose, you know, of all the screws and cranks and wheels ; I found out too why our neighbour's wife—who was a dressmaker, and had just started one—could not get it to go ; and before night, by thinking, and putting this and that together, had got her in the way of working it pretty steadily, though with my clumsy fingers I couldn't have done it myself.

I had my bit of dinner and tea with those people, and they forced half-a-crown upon me as well, and I went back feeling like a new man, so refreshing had been that bit of work.

“There,” said my wife, “I told you something would come.”

“Well, so you did,” I said ; “but the something is rather small.”

But the very next day—as we were living in the midst of people who were fast taking to sewing machines—if the folks from the next house didn't want me to look at theirs ; and then the news spreading, as news will spread, that there was somebody who could cobble and tinker machinery, without putting people to the expense that makers would, if the jobs didn't come in fast, so that I was obliged to get files and drills and a vice—regular set of tools by degrees ; and at last I was as busy as a bee from morning to night, and whistling over my work as happy as a king.

Of course every now and then I got a breakage, but I could generally get over that by buying a new wheel, or spindle, or what not. Next we got to supplying shuttles, and needles, and machine cotton. Soon after I bought a machine of a man who was tired of it. Next week I sold it at a good profit ; bought another,

and another, and sold them ; then got to taking them and money in exchange for new ones ; and one way and the other became a regular big dealer, as you see.

Hundred ? Why, new, second-hand, and with those being repaired upstairs by the men, I've got at least three hundred on the premises, while if anybody had told me fifteen years ago that I should be doing this, I should have laughed at him.

That pretty girl showing and explaining the machine to a customer ? That's Ruth, that is. No, not my daughter—yet, but she soon will be. Poor girl, I always think of her and of bread thrown upon the waters at the same time.

Curious idea that, you will say, but I'll tell you why.

In our trade we have strange people to deal with. Most of 'em are poor, and can't buy a machine right off, but are ready and willing to pay so much a week. That suits them, and it suits me, if they'll only keep the payments up to the end.

You won't believe me, perhaps, but some of them don't do that. Some of them leave their lodgings, and I never see them again : and the most curious part is that the sewing machine disappears with them, and I never see that again. Many a one, too, that has disappeared like that, I do see again—perhaps have it brought here by some one to be repaired, or exchanged for a bigger, or for one of a different maker ; for if you look round here, you'll see I've got all kinds—new and old, little domestics and big trades—there, you name any maker, and see if I don't bring you out one of his works.

Well, then I ask these people where they got the machine—for I always know them by the number—it

turns out that they've bought it through an advertisement, or at a sale-room, or maybe out of a pawnbroker's shop.

But I've had plenty of honest people to deal with too—they as have come straightforward, and told me they couldn't keep up their payments, and asked me to take their machine back, when I'd allow them as much as I thought fair, and 'twould be an end of a pleasant transaction.

The way I've been bitten though, by some folks, has made me that case-hardened that sometimes I've wondered whether I'd got any heart left, and the wife's had to interfere, telling me I've been spoiled with prosperity, and grown unfeeling.

It was she made me give way about Ruth, for one day, after having had my bristles all set up by finding out that three good sound machines, by best makers, had gone nobody knew where, who should come into the shop but a lady-like woman in very shabby widow's weeds. She wanted a machine for herself and daughter to learn, and said she had heard that I would take the money by instalments. Now just half-an-hour before, by our shop clock, I had made a vow that I'd give up all that part of the trade, and I was very rough with her—just as I am when I'm cross—and said, "No."

"But you will if the lady gives security," says my wife hastily.

The poor woman gave such a woe-begone look at us that it made me more out of temper than ever, for I could feel that if I stopped I should have to let her have one at her own terms. And so it was; for, there, if I didn't let her have a first-class machine, as good as new, she only paying seven and six down, and under-

taking to pay half-a-crown a week, and no more security than nothing !

To make it worse, too, if I didn't send the thing home without charge !—Luke going with it, for he was back at home now keeping my books, being grown into a fine young fellow of five-and-twenty ; and I sat and growled the whole of the rest of the day, calling myself all the weak-minded idiots under the sun, and telling the wife that business was going to the dogs, and I should be ruined.

“ You ought to be ashamed of yourself, Tom,” she said.

“ So I am,” says I. “ I didn't think I could be such a fool.”

“ Such a fool as to do a good kind action to one who was evidently a lady born, and come down in the world ! ”

“ Yes,” I says, “ to living in Bennett's Place, where I've sunk no less than ten machines in five years.”

“ Yes,” says the wife, “ and cleared hundreds of pounds. Tom I'm ashamed of you—you a man with twenty workmen busy up-stairs, a couple of thousand pounds' worth of stock, and in the bank——”

“ Hold your tongue, will you ! ” I said roughly, and went out into the shop to try and work it all off.

Luke came back just after, looking very strange, and I was at him directly.

“ Where's the seven and six,” I said, angrily.

He didn't answer, but put three half-crowns down on the desk, took out the book, made his entries—date of delivery, first payment, when the other's due, and all the rest of it—and was then going into the house.

“ Mind,” I says, sharply, “ those payments are to

be kept up to the day ; and to-morrow you go to Rollys, who live nearly opposite to 'em, and tell 'em to keep an eye on the widow, or we shall lose another machine."

" You needn't be afraid, father," he says coldly ; " they're honest enough, only poor."

I was just in that humour that I wanted to quarrel with somebody, and that did it.

" When I ask you for your opinion, young man, you give it me ; and when I tell you to do a thing, you do it," I says, in as savage a way as ever I spoke to the lad.

" You go over to-morrow and tell Rollys to keep a strict look-out on those people—do you hear ? "

" Father," he says, looking me full in the face, " I couldn't insult them by doing such a thing," when without another word he walked quietly out of the shop, leaving me worse than ever.

For that boy had never spoken to me like that before, and I should have gone after him feeling mad like, only some people came in, and I didn't see him again till evening, and a good thing too, for I'm sure I should have said all sorts of things to the boy, that I should have been sorry for after. And there I was fuming and fretting about, savage with everybody, giving short answers, snapping at the wife, and feeling as a man does feel when he knows that he has been in the wrong and hasn't the heart to go and own it.

It was about eight o'clock that I was sitting by the parlour fire, with the wife working and very quiet, when Luke came in from the workshop with a book under his arm, for he had been totting up the men's piecework, and what was due to them ; and the sight of him made me feel as if I must quarrel.

He saw it too, but he said nothing, only put the accounts away and began to read.

The wife saw the storm brewing, and she knew how put out I was, for I had not lit my pipe, nor yet had my evening nap, which I always have after tea. So she did what she knew so well how to do—filled my pipe, forced it into my hand, and just as I was going to dash it to pieces in the ashes, she gave me one of her old looks, kissed me on the forehead, as with one hand she pressed me back into my chair, and then with the other she lit a splint and held it to my tobacco.

I was done. She always gets over me like that ; and after smoking in silence for half-an-hour, I was lying back, with my eyes closed, dropping off to sleep, when my wife said (what had gone before I hadn't heard)—

“ Yes, he's asleep now.”

That woke me up of course, and if I didn't lie there shamming and heard all they said in a whisper !

“ How came you to make him more vexed than he was, Luke ? ” says the wife ; and he told her.

“ I couldn't do it, mother,” he said, excitedly. “ It was heart-breaking. She's living in a wretched room there with her daughter ; and, mother, when I saw her I felt as if—there, I can't tell you.”

“ Go on, Luke,” she said.

“ They're half-starved,” he said in a husky way. “ Oh, mother ! it's horrible. Such a sweet, beautiful girl, and the poor woman herself dying almost with some terrible disease.”

The wife sighed.

“ They told me,” he went on, “ how hard they had tried to live by ordinary needlework, and failed, and

that as a last resource they had tried to get the machine."

"Poor things!" says the wife; "but are you sure the mother was a lady?"

"A clergyman's widow," says Luke hastily; "there isn't a doubt about it. Poor girl! and they've got to learn to use it before it will be of any use."

"Poor girl, Luke?" says the wife softly; and I saw through my eyelashes that she laid a hand upon his arm, and was looking curiously at him, when if he didn't cover his face with his hands, rest his elbows on the table, and give a low groan! Then the old woman got up, stood behind his chair, and began playing with and caressing his hair like the foolish old mother would.

"Mother," he says suddenly, "will you go and see them?"

She didn't answer for a minute, only stood looking down at him, and then said softly—

"They paid you the first money?"

"No," he says hotly. "I hadn't the heart to take it."

"Then that money you paid was yours, Luke?"

"Yes, mother," he says simply; and those two stopped looking one at the another, till the wife bent down and kissed him, holding his head afterwards, for a few moments, between her hands; for she always did worship that chap, our only one; and then I closed my eyes tight, and went on breathing heavy and thinking.

For something like a new revelation had come upon me. I knew Luke was five-and-twenty, and that I was fifty-four, but he always seemed like a boy to me, and

here was I waking up to the fact that he was a grown man, and that he was thinking and feeling as I first thought and felt when I saw his mother, nigh upon eight-and-twenty years ago.

I lay back, thinking and telling myself I was very savage with him for deceiving me, and that I wouldn't have him and his mother laying plots together against me, and that I wouldn't stand by and see him make a fool of himself with the first pretty girl he sets eyes on, when he might marry Maria Turner, the engineer's daughter, and have a nice bit of money with her, to put into the business, and then be my partner.

"No," I says; "if you plot together, I'll plot all alone," and then I pretended to wake up, took no notice, and had my supper.

I kept rather gruff the next morning, and made myself very busy about the place, and I dare say I spoke more sharply than usual, but the wife and Luke were as quiet as could be; and about twelve I went out, with a little oil-can and two or three tools in my pocket.

It was not far to Bennett's Place, and on getting to the right house I asked for Mrs. Murray, and was directed to the second floor, where, as I reached the door, I could hear the clicking of my sewing machine, and whoever was there was so busy over it that she did not hear me knock; so I opened the door softly, and looked in upon as sad a scene as I shall ever, I dare say, see.

There in the bare room sat, asleep in her chair, the widow lady who came about the machine, and I could see that in her face which told plainly enough that the pain and suffering she must have been going through

for years would soon be over ; and, situated as she was, it gave me a kind of turn.

“It’s no business of yours,” I said to myself roughly ; and I turned then to look at who it was bending over my machine.

I could see no face, only a slight figure in rusty black ; and a pair of busy white hands were trying very hard to govern the thing, and to learn how to use it well.

“So that’s the gal, is it ?” I said to myself. “Ah ! Luke, my boy, you’ve got to the silly calf age, and I dare say——”

I got no farther, for at that moment the girl started, and turned upon me a timid, wondering face, that made my heart give a queer throb, and I couldn’t take my eyes off her.

“Hush !” she said softly, holding up her hand ; and I saw it was as thin and transparent as if she had been ill.

“My name’s Smith,” I said, taking out a screw-driver. “My machine : how does it go ? Thought I’d come and see.”

Her face lit up in a moment, and she came forward eagerly.

“I’m so glad you’ve come,” she said, “I can’t quite manage this.”

She pointed to the thread regulator, and the next minute I was showing her that it was too tight, and somehow, in a gentle timid way, the little witch quite got over me, and I stopped there two hours helping her, till her eyes sparkled with delight, as she found out how easily she could now make the needle dart in and out of some hard material.

" Do you think you can do it now ? " I said.

" Oh, yes, I think so ; I am so glad you came."

" So am I," says I gruffly ; " it will make it all the easier for you to earn the money, and pay for it."

" And I will work so hard," she said earnestly.

" That you will, my dear," I says in spite of myself, for I felt sure it wasn't me speaking, but something in me. " She been ill long ? " I said, nodding towards her mother.

" Months," she said, with the tears starting in her pretty eyes ; " but," she added brightly, " I shall have enough with this to get her good medicines and things she can fancy ; " and as I looked at her, something in me said—

" God bless you, my dear ! I hope you will ; " and the next minute I was going downstairs, calling myself an old fool.

They thought I didn't know at home, but I did. There was the wife going over and over again to Bennett's Place ; and all sorts of little nice things were made and taken there. I often used to see them talking about it, but I took no notice ; and that artful scoundrel, my boy Luke, used to pay the half-crown every week out of his own pocket, after pretending to go and fetch it from the widow's.

And all the time I told myself I didn't like it, for I could see that Luke was changed, and always thinking of that girl—a girl not half good enough for him. I remembered being poor myself, and I hated poverty, and I used to speak harshly to Luke and the wife, and feel very bitter.

At last came an afternoon when I knew there was something wrong. The wife had gone out directly

after dinner, saying she was going to see a sick woman—I knew who it was, bless you!—and Luke was fidgeting about, not himself; and at last he took his hat and went out.

“They might have confided in me,” I said bitterly, but all the time I knew that I wouldn’t let them. “They’ll be spending money—throwing it away. I know they’ve spent pounds on them already.”

At last I got in such a way that I called down our foreman, left him in charge, and took my hat and went after them.

Everything was very quiet in Bennett’s Place, for a couple of dirty dejected-looking women, one of whom was in arrears to me, had sent the children that played in the court right away because of the noise, and were keeping guard so that they should not come back.

I went up the stairs softly, and all was very still, only as I got nearer to the room I could hear a bitter wailing cry, and then I opened the door gently and went in.

Luke was there, standing with his head bent by the sewing machine; the wife sat in a chair, and on her knees, with her face buried in the wife’s lap, was the poor girl, crying as if her little heart would break; while on the bed, with all the look of pain gone out of her face, lay the widow—gone to meet her husband where pain and sorrow are no more.

I couldn’t see very plainly, for there was a mist-like before my eyes; but I know Luke flushed up as he took a step forward, as if to protect the girl, and the wife looked at me in a frightened way.

But there was no need, for something that wasn’t

me spoke, and that in a very gentle way, as I stepped forward, raised the girl up, and kissed her pretty face before laying her little helpless head upon my shoulder, and smoothing her soft brown hair.

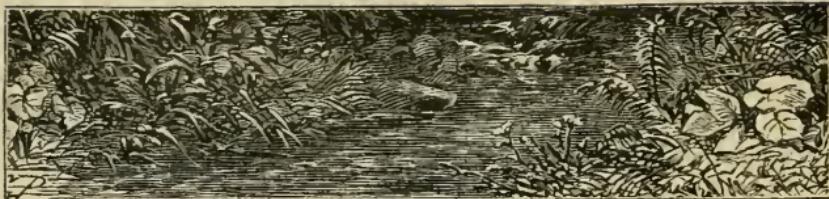
"Mother," says that something from within me, "I think there's room in the nest at home for this poor, forsaken little bird. Luke, my boy, will you go and fetch a cab? Mother will see to what wants doing here."

My boy gave a sob as he caught my hand in his, and the next moment he did what he had not done for years—kissed me on the cheek—before running out of the room, leaving me with my darling nestling in my breast.

I said "my darling," for she has been the sunshine of our home ever since—a pale, wintry sunshine while the sorrow was fresh, but spring and summer now.

Why, bless her! look at her. I've felt ashamed sometimes to think that she, a lady by birth, should come down to such a life, making me—well, no, it's us now, for Luke's partner—no end of money by her clever ways. But she's happy, thinking her husband that is to be the finest fellow under the sun; and let me tell you there's many a gentleman not so well off as my boy will be, even if the money has all come out of a queer trade.





CHAPTER VI.

A BIRD IN A CAGE.



MY visits to Burt's Buildings resulted in others to the neighbourhood where I made the acquaintance of Uncle Bill, as he was generally called by the swarming children about the place; not from any relationship, in fact for no reason at all that I could discover. One woman said it was because he was lame; another thought he was like an uncle, but all the same the little man often met me on my rounds, at first to look at me very dubiously, but ever after to pull his pipe out of his mouth, tap the bowl upon the pavement and thrust it into his pocket, out of compliment to me as a lady who might not like smoke.

“Taint in a woman’s natur’, mum, to like smoke,” he said, when I hinted that he need not put out his pipe, and no matter when we met I always received from him this bit of politeness.

Rumour reached me one morning, after a short visit to the country, that a dilapidated tenement or two, in this deplorable neighbourhood had fallen down, and on making my way to the place, the first person I encountered was Uncle Bill, pipe in mouth, and with

a half-quartern loaf in one hand, and a rasher of bacon in the other.

Before I could say a word the badly wrapped up rasher was thrust into his coat pocket, the pipe extinguished, and thrust in after it, and a smile and nod of recognition were awarded to me.

“Houses falling, mum? Oh! yes, it’s as fact as fact. Come down without a moment’s warning, afore you know’d where you were, I can tell you. I had a narrow escape.”

“What, were you there?”

“To be sure I was. Where should I be if I warn’t at home. It was at my old house. I’m in here, now,” he continued, pointing.

“There was the house up, as may be, lars night, and then, in the morning, it was a tumble-down heap o’ smash, with broken bedsteads, and chairs, and chesties of drawers, and all sorts, tumbled together into a mash, with bricks and mortar, and laths and plaster, and beams. It’s a mussy as no more wasn’t killed; for there was, counting myself, four-and-twenty people as lived in that house, and many had to run out for their lives. People think that houses will stand for ever; and when a house aint fit for nothing else but pulling down, some one buys the lease, puts a little whitewash on, and then lets all the rooms out at four or five shillings a week to poor people, while the old house groans and grumbles, and shakes on its pins awful. To-night, perhaps, Braggs, the cobbler in the back room, will have a row with his wife, and they’ll be tearing about till the place shivers again. Night afore, perhaps it was Dennis Murphy and his missus getting a bit excited over a quartern of gin, and then they must

get dancing up in their attic till other people's heads get plastered with bits o' whitewash as falls off the ceilings—only 'taint whitewash now, because it's turned t'other colour. Then the old house begins to show its sore places, and you can see an elbow shoving out here, and a crack there; first-floor winder sill's down on one side, and Mrs. Tibbs out of the second-floor back, when she pays her rent, tells the landlord as her door sticks so that she can't open and shet it; and then, as soon as Mrs. Sykes in the second-floor front knows as her neighbour has spoken, she tells the landlord as her window won't move. Then the first-floors say as there's a crack across their ceiling, and black dust falls out inter the bread and butter. And then what d'yer think the landlord does—eh? Get it all seen to, and shored up, and so on—eh? You'd think so, now, wouldn't you? But he don't; for I'll tell you what he does—he swears, that's what he does, and says as soon as ever people will pay up their rent and make all square, he'll do the house up.

“ That's a thing as he can promise safe enough, for there's no fear of that coming to pass; for they're all more or less behind, bless you, and he holds 'em as tight as wax. 'Tell you what it is,' he says, one day, 'them as don't like the place had better leave it, and if I have any more complaints I'll raise the rent.'

“ That was a quieter directly, you see; for they were all more or less in his power from being behind-hand. Houses and lodgings for poor people are dreadful scarce in London, and landlords and tenants knows it; and folks will put up with anything sooner than have to move. And that's just how it was in this house—people grumbled and bore it; till one

morning down it came with a rush, and three or four were killed dead, and ever so many cut up all sorts of ways. But, there, that ain't nothing new, bless you. We are used to that sort of thing in these courts.

“ It was about seven o'clock in the morning, I should say, and fortunately some had got up and gone to work ; but working at home on the piece, I wasn't so particular to half an hour ; but I was lying there thinking of rousing out, when all at once I heard a sharp, loud crack, and then another and another, followed by a curious rushing noise, and by a shriek or two. For a moment or two I thought it was thunder, and I lay quite still ; then came a rattling down of rubbish, and I saw the end wall of my room seem to bulge gently out, when there was a fierce rumbling crash, and I was hanging to a broken beam sticking out of the wall, clinging to it with bleeding hands, ready to drop each moment on to the jagged pile of ruins underneath me —a good thirty feet, and from which now came slowly up a thick cloud of dust, and from out of it every now and then a shriek or a groan.

“ I dare say, you know, at another time I could have hung there some minutes, but now a terrible sort of fear came over me which made me weak ; and after looking about as well as I could for help, to see nothing but the dust rising from the heap under me, as I hung over the gap where the house had stood a few minutes before—after looking round once or twice, I seemed to shudder like, and then down I went crash on to the ruins, to be one of the first picked up.

“ I lay there, though, for some time, waiting for help ; nobody daring to come, till one man crept through the window of the next house on to the heap of rubbish,

though he had to dart back once or twice ; for now one of the joists left sticking in the wall up above would fall, then a few tiles and some bricks that had been lingering in their places for a few minutes, came down to make matters worse. The end of one joist caught me right on the side of the head, and sent what little sense there was left in flying out ; and the next time I opened my eyes it was in the hospital, with some one doing something to my head, and me feeling sick, and dull, and sleepy as could be.

“ But it was a terrible sight to see : first one and then another poor bruised and cut creature dragged out of the ruins as fast as they could clear away the rubbish ; and there were the poor things half naked, and with the few bits of furniture belonging to them all in one ruinous smash. I did not see it, you know, but plenty of the neighbours did ; and I could find you a dozen ready to go over the whole story again and again, up to the finding of Mrs. Molloy and her little gal, her as lives now with her father, top of No. 16— pretty little gal she is, and so much like her mother as was killed. They tell me the people on both sides came suddenly out of their houses, as if it was an earthquake ; and, you know, really an earthquake would not be much worse so far as one house was concerned. You wouldn’t think it, though, but I saved all my birds as was left hanging against the walls.

“ Everybody was very sorry, of course, as soon as it was known ; and the papers wrote about it, and people talked of it, and then there were a few pounds put together for the benefit of the sufferers ; but you know what a sight of pounds it would take to make it all right for that poor little gal up there as lost her mother. Poor

little thing, she don't feel the loss much ; but it's a sad job for her.

" Hark ! don't you hear ? That's her bird. It's on'y a finch, but he whistles well, and it pleases her. I give it her, you know ; and when her father's out I goes up and feeds it, and gives it water, because she's too little to do it. She calls me ' Uncle Bill,' and I like to hear her ; for, you see, being a cripple, I ain't like other men, and somehow or other I always was fond of little children.

" Well, then, if *you* don't mind, I don't ; so come along, and then p'r'aps we can see her."

Up flight after flight of groaning stairs, to a landing spun across and across with a string web, upon whose intricacies scraps of white rag took the place of flies ; and now came the twittering of many birds, and the restless tap, tap, scraping noise of sharp beaks upon wire and perch. My lame guide opened the attic door, after muttering a warning about my head ; and there I stood on the top floor of the house in one of those rooms where fancy brought up visions of stern-faced old Huguenot silk weavers bending over their looms, and sending backwards and forwards the busy shuttle, as bright warp crossed the glistening woof.

But there was no loom here, only the long range of lead casement along one side of the room, filtering the rays of light as they entered dyed of a smoky hue—rays of light, though, so joyous that the dozens of little prisoners ranged about the room grew excited, and fluttered, and sang and twittered loudly.

My guide smiled proudly as I walked from cage to cage, and then, evidently with a thought for the bare shelf in the open cupboard, threw off his coat, un-

fastened his vest, loosened his collar, and then placed a circlet of greasy old black ribbon round his not too tidy black hair, as he seated himself upon his bench and dived into the mysteries of boot-closing.

“I can talk too, you know,” he said ; “that’s the best of my trade. Nice birds some of them, ain’t they ? Seems a shaine to keep ’em behind wires ; but then we all have to work behind wires, more or less, for other folks’s pleasure. They sings—we works ; don’t you see ? ”

But I had finished my inspection of mealy linnets and goldfinches, pegging finches and larks ; and had taken in at a glance the one bare room, with its white-washed walls, decorated here with pictures cut from the *Illustrated London News* and *Punch*, and there with glass Florence flasks filled with chintz flowers and salt, *potichomanie* fashion, as performed by our grandmothers ; the rusty, broken-barred grate, with its heaped-up ashes ; and the general untidiness of the bachelor place, made worse by the plentiful sprinkling of tobacco débris and the many broken craters in which the weed had been consumed. I had seen all I could in a hasty glance, and was now looking out of the open window at another bird in a cage ; for at the casement opposite, her little bright eyes glittering through a tangle of long brown hair, was the child of whom Uncle Bill had spoken. Her red lips were apart, and as I looked she shouted in across the court to the lame boot-closer, in a gleeful, childish treble ; while he turned his sallow face to me with a smile of gratified pride upon it that told—oh ! how plainly—of the true heart, unspoiled by the misery of a London court.

“That’s her,” he said—and his voice seemed to jar

discordantly, sounding of the streets, streety ; while the proud look upon his face had in it a tinge of the something greater as planted in all hearts by a great Hand—"that's her. She stands at that window for hours while I'm at work ; and I sing to her, as she claps her hands ; and, you know, her father leaves her locked up there like that for long enough while he goes out, and I know the little thing would be hungry if—but she ain't, you know." (Nods many here.) "I wish he'd let me have her altogether ; for he's a bad sort, is her father, and it worries me as to what's to become of the little thing. I'm not much account, you see, myself ; but, being such a pretty little thing, I should like to see her taken care of, and one daren't hardly speak to the child when he's at home, and he won't hardly let any of the women in the house go near his room at all.

"No, I say—don't you go near the window, or you'll frighten her away."

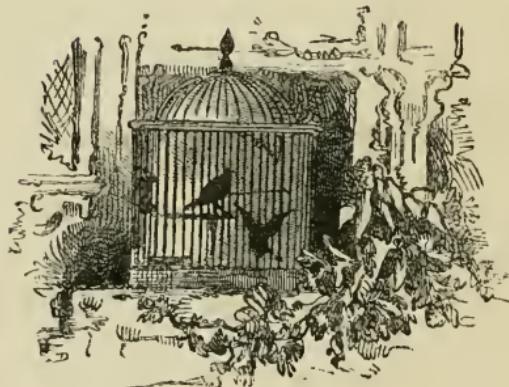
I kept back in the room so as to look on unseen, and then started forward ; for the bright look of pleasure upon the child's face turned to one of pain, as a rough hand seized her by the shoulder, drew her back, and then the window was dragged in, and fastened so sharply that one of the little panes was jarred out, and fell tinkling far below into the court.

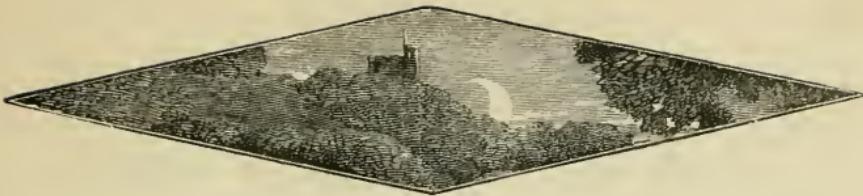
My next glance was at Uncle Bill, who was bending over his work with set teeth, and the sweat standing in drops upon his grimy forehead.

"There, don't speak to me," he said, huskily. "I'm a bit put out now ; hook it, and see me agen some other time, please."

I could hear the birds twittering as I went down

from landing to landing, meeting no unkindly looks; but, like Uncle Bill, one could not help feeling "a bit put out" concerning the future of the little bird I saw in its cage.





CHAPTER VII.

A GREAT TROUBLE.



IN my strange, reticent way I had a great objection to making friends unless they were people who needed my aid; then I seemed drawn to them, and an intimacy was sure to follow. There was one family, though, whom I came to know through Ruth Smith and her husband Luke, and from the very first they interested me—more, though, from the troubles through which they had passed than anything else.

Mr. Hendrick was a clerk in some great firm, and as our intimacy increased, and he saw the interest I took in his daughters, each of whom was a well educated young girl, just of an impressionable age, he used to speak very plainly of their future.

“I shall not be sorry,” he said, “to see them the wives of good earnest men, I don’t want them to make wealthy matches; but money is useful, of course.”

“They have never been from home?” I said.

“Oh, yes, both of them. But governesses, poor children, have not a happy time. Of course there are houses where there is a good sensible woman at the

head, and the governess finds a home ; but in too many cases she does not fare any too well."

"Yours have had some unpleasant experiences, then ?"

"Oh, yes," he said, smiling. "Ah, that was a hard time." It was just after my long illness, when I was laid by for six months.

"Of course, it was not reasonable to expect different treatment from the great firm with whom I had been for so many years ; but it came like a sharp pang when one morning at breakfast, just as I had made up my mind to go up to town and try again, the postman left a letter.

"It was very kindly written, and enclosed a cheque for fifty pounds ; but that did not seem to balance the intimation that the heads of the City place had filled up my post by promoting one of their employés ; for they said that it was quite evident I should not be in a condition to do active business for some months to come, and they advocated perfect rest and a sojourn at the sea side.

"I could not complain, for twice over I had been back, telling myself I was strong enough to go on, but each time I had broken down, and on the last occasion had to be sent home in a fly.

"The disease, you see, had left me so dreadfully nervous ; and directly I had attempted to think and direct, and plunge generally into the regular bustle of business, I had become confused and flurried, ending by sitting down miserably helpless, and obliged to confess myself beaten.

"'This is the worst cut of all,' I said with a groan, as I let the envelope and its enclosures fall

to the ground ; ‘ God help us ! what is to become of us ? ’

“ ‘ Oh, come, come ! ’ exclaimed my wife—bless her for a dear little woman who always thinks a looking-glass has two bright sides !—‘ come, come ! we shall manage right enough, dear, only wait and grow strong.’

“ ‘ Seven of us, and no income—nothing to look forward to in this weary, weary world,’ I groaned ; and I sank back and covered my face with my hands.

“ ‘ And as I did so I felt my little woman rest her forehead on my hands, and in a whisper she repeated those lines of Longfellow’s—

“ ‘ Be still, sad heart ! and cease repining ;
Behind the clouds is the sun still shining ;
Thy fate is the common fate of all :
Into each life some rain must fall,
Some days must be dark and dreary.’

“ I knew the truth of the words—very favourite ones of mine, which I had often quoted about other people’s sorrows—but now I could only moan in my weakness, and think of the future as a cloudy, rainy time, which no sunshine could ever pierce.

“ What was to become of our two girls, Hetty and Marie, of whom we had been so proud, and whom we had educated and trained with such care that while domestic in every way, they were ladies in the truest sense of the word—girls of eighteen and twenty ? What was to become of the little ones ?

“ For with my large family I had never been able to put much aside, but had trusted to insurance. What little I had saved had been swept away by the expenses of my long illness ; and now I had fifty pounds, a few

debts, the insurance-money to keep up, my health was shattered, and no prospective income.

“I can scarcely think about it all now without a strange swelling coming in my throat, for events followed one another pretty quickly then. Of course, I know that I had no business to repine; but I was in so weak and helpless a state that I did and said things very different to the thoughts and acts of a man in robust health.

“The next morning my eldest boy, a lad of fourteen then, sat perfectly still after breakfast, and looked preternaturally solemn. I did not see it then, but there was evidently a conspiracy afloat.

“‘Time you had gone to school, my boy,’ I said.

“‘Not going to-day, father,’ was the answer; and then it came out that the schoolmaster’s brother had undertaken to receive the boy into his office, without premium—he was a land agent and surveyor, and the boy was to reside with him.

“I was stunned almost. I knew it was a blessing in disguise—one hearty boy well provided for—but I was too full of repining to see it then.

“Dick went the next day; and this seemed a new trouble.

“Four days later Marie came to tell me that she was going to be nursery governess at the rectory; and though she was only going to be a mile away, that was another bitter pang; and I fear that I did no little towards sending the poor girl to her new home low-spirited and dejected.

“‘Our home’s being broken up now, dear,’ I said to my wife the evening after Marie had gone; and she gave such a sigh, and began to sob so violently, that I

knew there was something being kept back, and taxed her with it.

“ ‘ Tell me this instant,’ I said excitedly. ‘ What is it ? ’³

“ ‘ Pray, pray don’t be excited,’ she cried tenderly ; ‘ you know how it depresses you afterwards.’

“ ‘ Then tell me all about what has been done. Oh ! it’s cruel, cruel, cruel, while I am prostrate here, to be deceiving me as you all are.’

“ ‘ Harry, darling,’ my poor little wife sobbed, ‘ indeed, indeed we have been doing all for the best, and to help you in our difficulties.’

“ ‘ Yes, yes ; I know, I know,’ I said, laying my hand upon her head as she knelt there by my bedside ; ‘ it is I who am so pitifully mean and weak with my illness. Tell me all, dear ; I can bear it now.’

“ And I did try so hard ; though the weak tears would come rolling from beneath my closed eyelids as she told me that Hetty, my darling, the flower of the flock, with her sweet earnest grey eyes, fair face, and golden-brown hair, had nobly determined, too, to obtain a situation as governess ; had, unknown even to her mother, advertised ; had received an answer, and obtained an appointment in a merchant’s family at a salary of eight pounds per annum.

“ ‘ Yes ; and isn’t it lucky, father ? ’ exclaimed her bright, cheerful, young voice ; for she had been standing at the door.

“ ‘ Oh, my darling ! I can’t part with you,’ I groaned.

“ ‘ Only for a little while, father dear,’ she said nestling to me. ‘ And eight pounds a year ; that will be two pounds for me for dress—must dress well, dear—and six for you and mamma. That will nearly half

pay one quarter's rent, you know ; and think ! there will be three less to keep, and I do eat so heartily.'

" I tried very hard to follow in the same spirit of gaiety ; but in those days I was such a wet blanket that I soon led the way, and it ended in our all sobbing together at the thought of the coming separation.

" This may sound very simple to some people ; but by those who have lived in the circle of a united family, happy in their own modest way, I dare say it will be understood.

" The day of parting came so quickly, and my wife took my place, going up to town with Hetty, and seeing her safely installed, while I lay tossing feverishly on my bed, bemoaning my inability to act, and looking with envy through the open window at the labourer toiling in the hot sun with his pickaxe, mending the road.

" ' It's not much I ask ! ' I groaned, in an agony of supplication, as I lay there, and stretched out my thin and trembling hands ; ' only that I may have strength —strength to work. I care not how hard, how humble it may be, only give me back my strength.'

" Perhaps it was from exhaustion, but I felt and thought differently after that ; for it seemed to me then, as I lay there, that my prayer was heard, and a sweet restful sleep fell upon me, from which I awakened at last to find it was quite sunset, while, on looking round, there sat my wife watching by the bedside.

" ' Back,' I said, ' so soon ? '

" ' Soon, dear ? ' she said ; ' I have been sitting here an hour. It is seven o'clock, and they say you fell asleep before twelve. It was so sweet and sound a sleep that I would not wake you.'

“ I lay there quite still for a few minutes, holding her hand in mine, and then I said quite calmly—

“ ‘ Lizzie, I’m going to get strong now.’

“ ‘ Yes, yes ; of course, dear,’ she said ; and I saw the hopeless tears gathering in her eyes.

“ I smiled. She told me afterwards that I had not smiled with such a calm contented look on my countenance for many, many months, and it frightened her ; for she thought it might be the precursor of a terrible change.

“ ‘ Yes,’ I said, ‘ get strong ;’ and I patted the little transparent hand that had grown with anxiety and watching as thin as my own. ‘ Yes,’ I repeated again, ‘ get strong. I can feel it now. What is tomorrow ? ’

“ ‘ Friday,’ she said ; and her eyes dilated with fear.

“ ‘ Then get a few things ready, and on Saturday we will go down to one of those little villages near Dover for a month. The sea-air will give me the strength I want, and then to work once more. Thank God the worst is past ! ’

“ ‘ Harry, Harry, dear Harry ! ’ she sobbed, flinging her arms wildly round me, and drawing my head to her bosom. ‘ Oh, speak to me—speak again ! You are worse—much worse. No, no ; let go, let go,’ she cried frantically, as she struggled to get away, ‘ let me ring.’

“ ‘ What for ? what for, little woman ? ’ I said, holding her more tightly to my breast.

“ ‘ To get help—to send for the doctor,’ she cried wildly.

“ ‘ Hush, hush, ! ’ I said. ‘ Look at me—look in my eyes—do I seem worse ? ’

“ ‘ ‘ N—no,’ she faltered, gazing at me with her poor face all drawn and haggard ; ‘ but—but—’

“ ‘ Lay your head on my arm, darling, and listen,’ I said calmly. ‘ There, there, I tell you calmly and sanely that I am better. I know I am better. The old weary feeling has gone ; and I believe—yes, I believe that my prayer has been heard.’

“ Poor little weary heart, that had been so tortured for my sake ! It was long enough before I could calm her to the same belief as mine ; but at last she sat there with her head resting on the pillow nearest mine, and she answered my questions about her journey to town with Hetty.

“ ‘ ‘ A nice house ? ’ I said.

“ ‘ ‘ Yes ; a large pretentious place in a new square.’

“ ‘ ‘ And the people ? ’

“ ‘ ‘ I only saw the mistress and children.’

“ ‘ ‘ Nice ? ’

“ ‘ ‘ Ye—es.’

“ ‘ ‘ Wife a little pompous, perhaps ? ’

“ ‘ ‘ Yes ; I could not help thinking so,’ she faltered.

“ ‘ ‘ And the children rude and disagreeable ? ’ I said, smiling.

“ ‘ ‘ I’m—I’m afraid so,’ she faltered.

“ ‘ ‘ Never mind, never mind,’ I said cheerfully. ‘ It shan’t be for long, little woman. I shall never rest till I have a comfortable home for our darlings once again ; and Hetty, God bless her ! she has a way and disposition that must make every one love her. Mistress, children, servants, they will all love and respect her ; so we must be patient for a while—only be patient.’

“ These words frightened my poor wife again, but my calm quiet smiles reassured her ; and that evening I

sat up and had tea with those who were left—the two little ones—by the open window of my bedroom, and a sweet sense of calmness and content was over me, such as I had not known for many weary months.

“I was down in the garden the next morning before the sun was hot. I had always loved my bit of garden, and by the help of a hoe walked all round it, feeling a little sad to see how it had gone to ruin, but already making plans for the future.

“‘Ah, Mr. Hendrick!’ said a cheery voice, and I recognized a neighbour with whom I had often ridden up to business of a morning; ‘glad to see you so much better.’

“‘Thank you, I am much better,’ I said, catching the extended hand, and feeling a warm glow at my heart in the friendly grasp.

“‘By the way don’t be offended,’ he said, ‘but are you going to leave your house?’

“‘I am thinking of doing so,’ I said sadly.

“‘I don’t mean that,’ he said hastily. ‘I mean for a month or six weeks. An old friend of mine, a country lawyer, wants a furnished residence for self and family for a time, handy to town, where he has a big railway case on. I thought, perhaps if you were going to the sea side for a bit—you know—he’s well off—ask stiff rent, and that sort of thing—eh?—think it over.’

“‘I—I will,’ I said, gasping for breath; for this new piece of good fortune was almost too much for me.

“Suffice it that I promised to send him word, and the result was that, though it delayed my going for a few days, before the next week was over I was down in a pleasant cottage by the sea side, with not only enough

for current expenses, but a good surplus coming from the rent of our own house, for my neighbour had secured for me a far higher sum than I should have asked ; and there was no occasion to touch the fifty pounds, with which I cleared off all my debts.

“ That was a calm and delicious time, when with the sweet sense of returning strength I lay upon the sands, drawing in the iodine-laden sea-breeze, and seeming to feel a change day by day. We had the most cheerful letters from the girls and our boy, telling us of their success, and Hetty’s were above all long and affectionate.

“ But I was not satisfied ; there seemed to me to be a forced gaiety about Hetty’s letters that troubled me, and I could not think them real, for it seemed to me as if she wrote these notes solely for the sake of making me cheerful, and they had the opposite result. In fact, I would at that time far rather have heard that she was uncomfortable, and longing for the time when she might return home.

“ Meanwhile, as the weeks slipped by, I grew so well that I felt almost like my former self ; and had anything been wanting to complete my cure, it was a visit from a former partner of the firm I had served. He had left them years before to commence business for himself, and had thriven so that his establishment was as large as that from which he had split.

“ We had always been on civil terms, but I never thought he had noticed me. Now, however, on finding out that I was disengaged, he came to me with a most brilliant offer—at least it seemed so to me then.

“ ‘ I always longed to have your clear head to depend on,’ he said, ‘ but, of course, honour forbade any nego-

tiations while you were with the old firm. Now you are free, I shall be very glad if you will join me.'

"'I'm afraid my clear head has gone for ever,' I said sadly.

"'Pooh, nonsense, man!' he said, laughing. 'You've had a nasty attack, but that's all gone, and you'll be your own man in another week. Come, say the word, you'll join me, and I won't make promises, but come to me and let me feel that I've always somebody at the house that I can trust and depend on while I'm away, and perhaps some day we'll talk about a junior partnership.'

"I could not thank him, but I gave him my hand, and he left me, evidently congratulating himself on having done a good stroke of business; while I—I felt as if I could never atone for my repinings under affliction.

"But my great trouble was to come.

"We were sitting at breakfast the next morning, talking about how it would be quite unnecessary now to give up the house, when a letter came.

"It was a strange hand, from London, and somehow with a sense of impending evil I began slowly turning it over, and telling my wife that it had been down to the old house, and re-directed here, so that it was over a day old.

"At last I opened it, read it, and it dropped from my hands.

"I caught it up again though, the next moment, and read it out to my wife. It was as follows:—

"'50, WOODMOUNT SQUARE.

"'Wednesday.

"'SIR,—It is an unpleasant task, but as I have had your daughter living beneath my roof, I feel it to be my duty to inform you that

two days ago she left here in a clandestine manner, and has not thought proper to return. It is, of course, a very painful admission to make, especially to her father, but as it is a duty, I do not shrink therefrom. Your daughter's conduct has given Mrs. St. Ray great cause for anxiety from the first, as it has been flighty, and not at all lady-like. We should very shortly have dismissed her, as we do not approve of gentlemen visiting the instructress of our children. As she has, however, taken this step, I have no more to say, and feeling that I have done my duty,

“ ‘ I am,

“ ‘ Your obedient Servant,

“ ‘ ALEXANDER ST. RAY.

“ ‘ Mr. Hendrick.

“ If I had any remnant of my old weakness hanging about before, it was all cleared away now, as I stood tearing the letter to fragments.

“ ‘ It’s a lie—a wicked, atrocious lie ! ’ I exclaimed, stamping on the pieces. ‘ Our darling has been driven away, or there is something wrong. She would never act like this.’

“ ‘ Never, Harry,’ exclaimed my wife, who stood there flushed and angry one moment, pale as ashes the next. ‘ But stop ! what are you going to do ? ’

“ ‘ Going to do ? ’ I roared, “ going to seek for our child.”

“ ‘ But you are not strong enough—the agitation—’

“ ‘ Strong ! agitation ! ’ I exclaimed, catching her so tightly by the arm that she winced. ‘ Look at me, Lizzy ; I never felt stronger in my life.’

“ In less than an hour I was being whirled up to town by the train, and on reaching the station, the cab that took me on to Woodmount Square seemed to crawl.

“ I thundered so at the knocker, and dragged so fiercely at the visitors’ bell, that the footman in a tawdry livery

stared at me aghast as he opened the door, and I strode in.

“ ‘Tell your master I want to see him,’ I said hastily.

“ ‘Ain’t at home, sir,’ he said, recovering himself.

“ ‘Your mistress, then,’ I cried fiercely.

“ ‘She ain’t—’

“ ‘Confound you !’ I roared, catching him by the collar, to the disarrangement of his white cravat ; ‘tell her—there, there !’ I said, cooling down and slipping a couple of florins in the man’s hand. ‘Here, show me in directly to either of them ; I am Miss Hendrick’s father.’

“ The man’s frightened, angry face changed on the instant, and he showed me at once into a garish drawing-room, where a coarse, florid woman was lying back on a lounge, fanning herself.

“ ‘Mrs. St. Ray,’ I said hastily, ‘my name is Hendrick. I have come up in answer to your husband’s letter.’

“ ‘You must see him, my good man,’ she exclaimed angrily. ‘I told Thomas not to admit any one.’

“ ‘But this is life or death to me, madam—my child’s honour. Tell me, I beg of you, all you know.’

“ ‘You people should bring your children up better,’ was the reply. ‘It’s very dreadful—very shocking ! and my poor darlings have had a most narrow escape.’

“ ‘Did it never occur to you, madam, that other people have darlings whom they love ?’ I exclaimed, unable to control my anger. ‘But there, tell me, what steps have you taken to find out where she went ?’

“ ‘Steps ! I take steps ? Absurd ! My good man, you must be mad.’

“ ‘I shall be soon,’ I muttered, then aloud—

“‘ But you have done something, madam, surely?’

“‘ I desired Mr. St. Ray to write to you, and of course you are the proper person to take steps, as you term it,’ said the lady contemptuously.

“‘ Tell me when she left and how. Give me some information, I beg of you,’ I exclaimed.

“‘ My good man, I cannot touch the subject at all. It is too painful—too dreadful. See Mr. St. Ray. When I think of having harboured so dreadfully shameless a creature, I feel faint—it turns me sick.’

“I dared not speak—I dared not give utterance to the rage still struggling in my breast, for this was only a woman, and such a woman, that I dashed out of the room, and the door banged heavily behind me.

“As I left the room I nearly fell over the footman, who had evidently been listening, and I caught a glimpse of two female heads disappearing at a doorway as I hurried down the stairs.

“‘ Here, my man,’ I said, ‘ tell me all you know,’ and I thrust my hand once more into my meagrely filled pocket.

“‘ Oh, it’s all right, sir, I don’t want paying,’ said the footman hastily. ‘ It’s my belief she drove poor Miss Hendrick away with her temper. She’s a wunner,’ he continued in a whisper, ‘ reg’lar tiger-cat, and the young ones is reg’lar tiger-kittens—beasts,’ he added, half savagely.

“‘ Tell me when she went.’

“‘ Well, sir, it was the night afore the night afore last as she went out, and didn’t come back. I’m going, too, and so’s two of the maids.’

“‘ Did she take her box?’

“‘ Lor’, no, sir, nothing at all; and when she didn’t

come back, we down in the servants' 'all said as she had been driven away, and gone home.'

"'But," I said, and I felt the blood come into my face as I asked the question about my own child, 'but did she go alone ?'

"'Oh, yes, I think so, sir.'

"'And'—I was choking as I asked the question—'what gentlemen came to see her ?'

"'Gentlemen—to see her ?'

"'Yes; your master said so in his letter.'

"'Why, what a whopper !' exclaimed the man indignant. 'Nobody never came to see her once. Stop ! yes, they did.'

"My heart seemed to stand still at his words.

"'Yes, there was an old gentleman called one afternoon—grey-headed old gentleman—a parson, of course—so there was. It was while I was out with the carriage. Hann let him in, and fetched Miss Hendrick down, and she saw him in the dining-room. I remember Hann told me all about it. To be sure ; and that little cat, Miss Celia, kicked up a row because Hann wouldn't let her go into the dining-room while the gentleman was here, and she said she'd tell her mar. Miss Hendrick ain't been home, then, sir ?'

"'No, my man, no.'

"'Then I should go bang to the pleece station, sir. They'd find out.'

"I took the man's advice, and went to the nearest station, where I saw a sergeant, and stated my case, while he made notes in a book.

"'Lady young ?' he said.

"'Twenty.'

"I saw the man tighten his lips.

“ ‘ Pretty ? ’

“ ‘ Very pretty,’ I said, emphatically.

“ The man’s lips tightened still more, and I saw a faint smile as he spoke again.

“ ‘ We’ll do our best, sir, but this is a detective case. I should go to Scotland Yard if I was you. Young ladies will do these sort of things. Gets led away, you know.’

“ ‘ What is it, Thomson ? ’ said an officer whom I saw to be an inspector ; and his coming stopped an indignant exclamation on my lips.

“ ‘ Young lady missing,’ said the sergeant.

“ ‘ What description ? ’ said the inspector, going to the desk.

“ I repeated it hastily, and the inspector turned sharply round to his subordinate and spoke to him in a low tone. He then turned to me.

“ ‘ I’m very sorry, sir,’ he said kindly. ‘ Just take a seat. Any relative ? ’

“ ‘ Daughter,’ I panted ; and then I read that in the man’s eyes which made the whitewashed office seem to swim round ; a deathly sickness overcame me, and all was blank.

“ The next thing I remember is feeling cold water splashing my face, and a kindly voice saying—

“ ‘ Come, come ! hold up, sir. It’s not so bad as that. There, drink some of this.’

“ I drank some of the water the inspector held to my lips, and two constables who had been supporting me drew back.

“ ‘ I’ve been very ill,’ I stammered, “ and I am weak ; but tell me, pray tell me the worst.”

“ ‘ Well, sir, the worst is that the young lady’s getting

better, I hope. That was the last report, if it's the same. She was knocked down by a van on the fifteenth ; concussion of the brain ; small bone of arm broken ; no means of identification ; taken to St. George's Hospital ; last news, still insensible, but doctors hopeful.'

"This principally read to me from a book which the inspector consulted.

"A cab, please, quick!" I faltered.

"Cab directly, Thomson," said the inspector.—
"There, I'll go with you."

"That inspector holds a place in my heart amongst those to whom I owe gratitude, for he was very kind. He took me, trembling and agitated, to the hospital, and there, after a short delay, we were taken to a bedside in a small, beautifully clean, and airy ward, where a doctor was sitting by my darling, who lay there very feeble, but with the light of reason beginning to shine once more from her gentle eyes.

"She recognized me, but her voice was quite a whisper, and I could see that she was confused and puzzled as to her presence there.

"I need not tell you of her rapid strides back to convalescence, nor more of her accident than that all she recollects was a warning cry as she crossed the road, and then seeming to wake in the hospital with me standing at her side.

"Our sojourn by the sea lasted another month for her sake, but by then I was busy once again, and working easily and well.

"Need I say that my darlings were both soon back in their old home, never to leave us again?"

"I could not refrain from smiling.

“ ‘ ‘ Why do you laugh ? ’ he said.

“ ‘ ‘ I was only thinking,’ I said, sadly, as I could not help comparing the young happy maidenhood of the two girls with my own. I did not know that I smiled.

“ Oh, I see your meaning,” he said, laughing. “ Well, yes, perhaps you are right: young birds will make nests elsewhere, and there may be fresh partings; for the son of our old clergyman, who called upon Hetty in Woodmount-square, spends a great deal of his spare time here.”

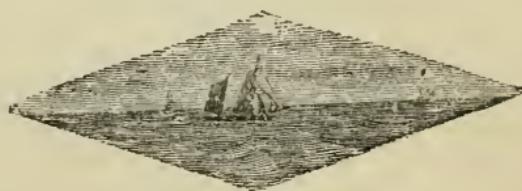
“ Yes,” I said, “ and I thought Marie blushed very vividly the other day when I saw her here with that lad Edwards.”

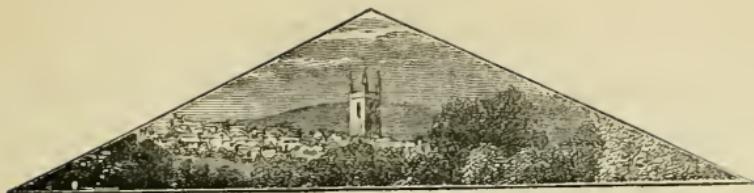
“ Ah, yes,” he said nodding his head thoughtfully. “ I knew John Edwards’ father at school. He’s a good young fellow, and as you say, or rather as you think, we may lose our darlings after all.”

“ And that was your great trouble ? ” I said.

“ Yes,” he replied, “ sunshine and rain. I had both, though I could not see clearly through the storm.”

“ Your failing was that of many,” I said sadly; “ and it is so, that whatever rain falls into each life, God sends his sunshine to dry those tears.”





CHAPTER VIII.

AS COMPANION TO A LADY.



THE governess question was discussed more than once at the Hendricks—the position of governesses and companions, Mrs. Hendrick and her daughters agreeing with me that some poor girls suffered a martyrdom at the hands of their employers, especially where there was a family of spoilt children, but at the same time we acknowledged that there was often a want of tact on the part of the young people who undertook the duties of governesses.

On the last occasion it was in the presence of a quiet subdued lady, who seemed to be about four or five-and-thirty, who had formed a friendship for Hetty while she was at Mrs St. Ray's, and had continued the acquaintance since. There was something about her that attracted me at the first occasion of our meeting, and by degrees our friendly feeling strengthened, but it was not until after the evening when she spoke that my heart truly warmed to her, for there was a similarity in her career to mine that seemed to act as a bond.

On the evening in question Agnes Laurie had been listening quietly to the conversation, and at last said :—

“ I believe, of course, that there is a great deal of ill-treatment of governesses, but my experience has been as companion to a lady, and I have found nothing but kindness. It is many years ago, now over ten, since I came from the country, and I can recall, only too well, the morning when my landlady came into the room upon a very unpleasant errand.

“ ‘ I’m very sorry Miss,’ she exclaimed, ‘ and I’m very sorry you’re not well off; but I’m only a poor woman myself, and if you can’t pay the rent of this room, I don’t see as you can afford the rent of the one upstairs.’

“ Here my landlady rubbed her nose viciously upon her apron, and stared straight out of the very dirty window.

“ As this was evidently a challenge to me to reply, I said, as firmly as I could, a few words which brought out the reason for the woman’s visit that morning.

“ ‘ Am I to understand, then, that you wish me to leave.’

“ ‘ If you please, miss, at the end of the week, for there’s the gent on the first floor would like to have this bedroom.’

“ ‘ Very well, Mrs. Ruddock,’ I said, ‘ I will find a room elsewhere.’

“ ‘ Thanky, miss,’ she said sharply; and giving her nose another vicious rub, she left me to my thoughts—and my tears.

“ For I was weak, faint, and heart-sick, and the coins in my purse had dwindled down, so that if I did not succeed in obtaining an engagement in a very few days, I had no resource but to creep back to the country and avow my failure.

“Just three months since, and we were all so happy in the little country vicarage ; and then, in visiting one of his people, my poor father caught a dangerous fever, while in tending him my dear mother was stricken with the same complaint, and ere three weeks had passed Minna and I sat in the little study alone, in deep black ; for the struggle had been brief, and those we loved lay together in the green churchyard, and we were only intruders now in the vicarage that had been our home.

“We were nearly penniless, too, but a brother clergyman of my father’s, quite as poor, came forward and offered us a temporary home till, as he said, some opening should occur for us.

“I gladly accepted it for Minna ; but, for myself, I was determined to try great London and, unaided, fight my way. In two years John Murray was to come back from Australia to fetch me for his wife, and till then I would be independent. So the day came at last when, with many tears, we two girls had to separate, and with aching heart I left the old Lincolnshire home, and reached the great dreary void of London early one afternoon.

“I was not long in finding a place where I could stay in the shape of a second-floor front room in one of those heart-aching streets near the Foundling—streets that echo from morning to night with mournful cries uttered by vendors whose goods it is impossible to surmise, and with the dismal echoing tones of the various organs. So painful were these last to me, that often of an evening, when I have returned from a weary, disheartening search for an engagement, and sat alone and hungry, fearing to spend my money in anything beyond the tea and bread-and-butter upon

which I existed, these doleful strains—cheering, perhaps, to some—have had such an effect upon me that I have sat and sobbed till, utterly worn out, I have fallen asleep, to wake, perhaps hours after, to find it very late, and crawl shivering off to bed.

“As the weeks passed on, and my advertisements and fees paid to the various registry offices had been without effect, I used to crawl back to my room, growing more and more disheartened. I was always a plain sallow-looking girl, and now in my fast-wearing black I began to feel that I was day by day growing more shabby and weary-looking, and that my feeble chances of obtaining a post were growing less and less.

“I used to sit and ask myself whether I had tried hard, and I knew I had ; but there was only one result. Whether I advertised for a situation as governess, or went from a registry office to offer myself as companion to a lady, it was always the same ; I noticed a look of disappointment as soon as I entered the room, for I was neither pretty nor bright-looking, and my mournful black helped to sadden my aspect. It was, I say, always the same—the lady did not think I should suit her ; and in blank despair I had to go away.

“And now it had come to this : that my landlady had grown as tired of me as the people at the registry offices, where I had more than once been rudely told that I was not likely to get a place as governess or companion, but had better look lower in the scale. That afternoon, evidently suspicious of my ability to pay, and perhaps disgusted with my miserable way of living, and afraid that I should be left an invalid upon her hands, she had—rudely, it seemed to me—requested me to leave.

“ In my present circumstances I was utterly prostrated by the news, for I dared not take lodgings elsewhere ; and I could see no prospect now but to sell a portion of my scanty wardrobe, and go back to beg for assistance from my father’s friend.

“ What a change ! and how soon had my hopes of independent action been blighted ! I was heartsore as I felt how that in that great city there was wealth being squandered and luxury around me while I was literally starving ; for my poor living was telling upon me fast. What should I do ? What should I do ?

“ It was with weary iteration I had said those words, and wept till tears came no more, and a dull, stolid feeling of despair had come upon me. I had almost shrunk away in the streets from the bright-faced, happy girls I passed ; and at times I found myself asking what was my sin that I should be punished as I had been.

“ I lay awake that night for many hours watching the light from the street lamp playing upon my ceiling, and at last, towards morning, the remembrance of words I had often heard came to me with a calm sense of repose, trust, and restfulness, and I believe I fell asleep at last with a smile upon my lips, repeating a portion of that comforting sentence ending, ‘ Are ye not much better than they ? ’

“ It was a bright, sunshiny morning when I awoke, to hear some one knocking at my door ; and hurrying on a few things, I answered.

“ ‘ Ah ! I was just a-going to take ‘em down again,’ said my landlady harshly. ‘ Some folks can afford to lie in bed all day ; I can’t. Here’s two letters for you. And mind this, Miss Laurie : I never bargained to

come tramping up to the top of the house with letters and messages for you.'

" 'I'm very much obliged, Mrs. Ruddock,' I said gently, as I took the letters with trembling hands, while, muttering and complaining, their bearer went down stairs. It seemed very hard then, but I believe it was the woman's habit, and that she was not bad at heart, but warped and cankered by poverty, hard work, and ill-usage from a drunken husband, whom she entirely kept.

" One letter I saw at a glance was from Minna, the other was in a strange crabbed hand; and I longed to read them; but exercising my self-denial, I dressed, lit my fire, and prepared my very frugal breakfast before sitting down and devouring Minna's news.

" What right had I to murmur as I did last night? I asked myself, when she was evidently so happy and contented; and then I opened, with fluttering hand, the other letter, and was puzzled by it at first; but at last I recalled the fact that three weeks before I had answered an advertisement in the *Times* where a lady wanted a companion.

" The note was very brief and curt, and ran as follows:—

" If Miss Laurie is not engaged, she can call upon Mrs. Langton Porter, 47, Morton Street, Park Village South, at eleven o'clock to-morrow—Thursday."

" 'At last!' I said to myself, joyfully; and with beating heart I prepared myself for my journey, for the appointment was for that morning.

" Just as I had pretty well timed myself for my walk, a sudden squall came on, the sky was darkened, snow fell heavily, and in place of a morning in spring we

seemed to have gone back into winter, for in a very short time the snow lay thickly, and the branches of the trees were whitened in the squares.

“ Weak as I was, this disheartened me, but I fought my way bravely on, and just at eleven rang timidly at the door of an important-looking house, and was superciliously shown, by a stout tall footman in drab livery, into a handsomely-furnished room. Everything in the place I noticed was rich and good: heavy curtains hung by window and door; skins and Eastern rugs lay on the polished wood floor; a tremendous fire blazed in a great brass fire place, and the flames danced and were reflected from the encaustic tiles with which it was surrounded.

“ ‘I’ll take your note in,’ said the footman, as I handed it. ‘ You can sit down.’

“ I preferred to stand, and as soon as I was alone I shivered with fear and cold, as I caught a glance of my pale, sallow face in a great mirror. Every moment I expected to see the owner of the place, but I remained standing wearily for an hour, and then I sighed and turned wistfully to look at the door, wondering whether the footman had taken in the note which I had given him as my passport.

“ I started, for close behind me, having entered unheard, was a rather plump tall lady in black. She was dressed as if for going out, and well wrapped in furs.

“ ‘ Oh ! you are waiting,’ she said harshly; and a shade of displeasure crossed her face, as she looked full at me till my eyes dropped. ‘ There, Miss—Miss —Miss ! ’

“ ‘ Laurie,’ I suggested.

“ ‘ Yes, yes; I know,’ she said sharply; ‘ it is in my

note. Pray, why in the name of common sense did you not sit down? Take that chair. Now then, have you been companion to a lady before?

“ ‘No, ma’am,’ I replied ; and then, in answer to her questions, all very sharply given, I told her so much as was necessary of my story.

“ ‘I don’t think you will suit me,’ she said ; ‘I’ve had misery enough, and I want some one cheerful and agreeable, a lady whom I can trust, and who will be a pleasant companion. There, I’m sure there is not such a body in London, for the way I’ve been imposed upon is dreadful! I’ve had six in six months, and the number of applications I have had nearly drove me out of my senses. I’ve had one since you wrote to me—a creature whose sole idea was herself. I want one who will make me her first consideration. I don’t mind what I pay, but I want some one tall and lady-like, and you are not pretty, you know.’

“ I shook my head sadly.

“ ‘Humph! Well,’ she went on, ‘you won’t be so giddy, and be always thinking of getting married. There, you need not blush like that ; it’s what all the companions I have had seem to think about. You don’t I suppose ?’

“ ‘I am engaged to be married,’ I said, hanging down my head, ‘in a couple of years.’

“ ‘Ho! Well, he mustn’t come here, for I’m a very selfish pragmatical old woman ; and if I engaged you—which I don’t think I shall do—I should want you all to myself. What is he ?’

“ ‘A surgeon—abroad,’ I faltered.

“ ‘Ho! That’s better ; and perhaps he’ll settle there altogether without you.’

“ I looked at her indignantly, and she laughed.

“ ‘ Ah ! I know, my good girl. I haven’t lived to eight-and-forty for nothing. How old are you ? ’

“ ‘ Twenty,’ I said, shivering, for her rough way repelled me, and I longed to bring the interview to an end.

“ ‘ Why, the girl’s cold,’ she said roughly. ‘ H’m, twenty ! Here, go up to the fire, and have a good warm ; it’s dreadful weather. There, pull off your bonnet and jacket. Put them on that chair, and go closer to the fire ; I’ve a deal to say to you yet, for I’m not going to engage another young person and have to change directly.’

“ I obeyed her, trembling the while, for I was very weak ; and she went on asking me questions and making comments.

“ ‘ I don’t like your appearance at all : you look pale and unhealthy. Not a bit like a girl from the country.’

“ ‘ I’m very sorry,’ I said ; ‘ but indeed, ma’am, I have excellent health.’

“ ‘ Then your face tells stories about you. You play, of course ? ’

“ ‘ Yes, ma’am.’

“ ‘ You’re warm now. Go and play something. Can you sing ? ’

“ ‘ Yes, ma’am.’

“ ‘ Then sing too ; and look here, Miss—Miss—Miss—’

“ I was about to tell her my name, but remembering the last rebuff, I was silent.

“ ‘ Now, look here, my good young lady, how am I to remember your dreadful name ? What is it ? ’

“ ‘ Laurie, ma’am,’ I replied.

“‘Of course it is: I remember it quite well. Now go and play and sing something; and mind, I don’t want my ears deafened with fireworks, and the drums split with parrot-shriek bravuras. Sing something sweet and simple and old-fashioned—if you can,’ she added, ungraciously.

“I crossed the room and sat down to the magnificent piano, and for the next five minutes I seemed to be far away, down in the old home, as I forgot where I was, in singing my poor dead father’s favourite old ballad, ‘Robin Adair;’ while, as I finished, I had hard work to keep back the tears.

“‘Ro—bin A—dair,’ she sang, as I rose, in a not unpleasing voice. ‘Now let me hear you read. I always make my companion read to me a great deal; and mind this, I hate to hear any one drone like a school-girl. Go over there into the corner of the window, and stand there. Take that book; you’ll find the mark left in where Miss Belleville—bah! I believe her name was Stubbs, and her father a green-grocer—left off. Now then, begin!’

She pushed a lounge-chair close up to the window, and sat down with her hands in her muff, while I stood there, feeling like a school-girl, and ready to drone, as I began to read with faltering voice what happened to be Thackeray’s most beautiful chapter—The Death of poor old Colonel Newcome. I know my voice trembled at times, and a strange sense of choking came upon me as I went on, battling—oh! so hard—to read those piteous heart-stirring lines; but I was weak and suffering, I was faint with hunger and exertion, sick with that despair of hope deferred, and at last the room, with its costly furniture, seemed to swim round before



"WHILE I STOOD THERE FEELING LIKE A SCHOOLGIRL,"—(see p. 104).

me, a cold perspiration bathed my face, and with a weary sigh I caught feebly at the curtains, and then fell heavily upon the polished floor.

“I have some faint memory of being lifted, and wheeled in a chair whose castors I heard chirrup, to the front of the fire, and then, as my senses began to return, I seemed to feel arms round me, and a pleasant voice saying, half aloud :

“And she just lost her poor father too—to set her to read such a thing as that! I declare I’m about the wickedest, most thoughtless, and unfeeling old woman under the sun.”

“Then there was the refreshing odour of a vinai-grette, and the sick feeling began to pass away.

“‘I—I beg pardon,’ I faltered, trying to rise.

“‘I beg yours, my dear,’ she said, tenderly. ‘Sit still, sit still. Now then, try and drink that.’

“Some sherry was held to my lips, and then I was almost forced to eat a biscuit. They, however, rapidly revived me, and I found Mrs. Porter had torn off her bonnet and mantle, and was kneeling by my side.

“That’s better, my dear,” she said, smiling at me, as she passed her arm round my waist, and drew me nearer to her, and kissed me in a gentle, motherly way. This was too much, for I was very weak and hysterical. I could fight against harshness, but her tender words and ways unlocked the flood-gates of my grief, and I laid my head down and sobbed as if my heart would break.

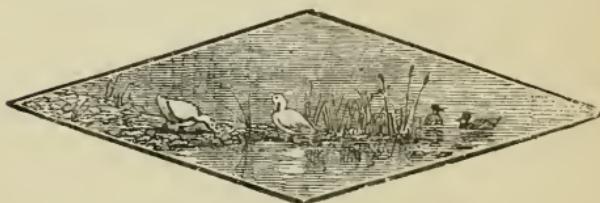
“An hour later, after she had literally forced me to partake of the breakfast that was ordered up, she sat beside me, holding my hand, and more than once I saw the tears steal down her pleasant face as she won

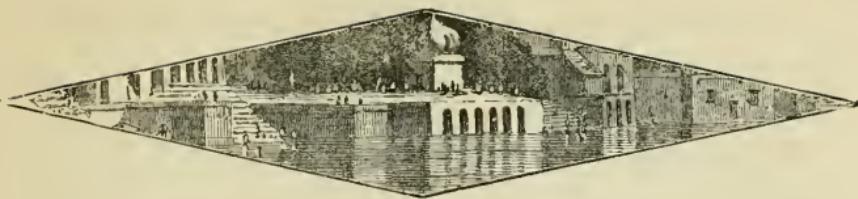
from me, bit by bit, the story of my troubles and my bitter struggles here in town.

“At last I rose to go, trembling and expectant. Would she engage me? It was more than I dared to hope.

“‘Sit still, my child,’ she said, tenderly, ‘and stay with me; we shall be the best of friends.’

“I stayed—stayed to know her real worth and to win her motherly love—stayed to find, when John Murray returned, that his love was greater for my sister than for me, and patiently resigned my love to her, and then battled with a long illness when they had gone together to the far-off home. But every day gave me a new lesson on not judging too hastily. That is ten years since; and I am still in my peaceful, happy home, though only as companion to a lady.”





CHAPTER IX.

MY OLD SERGEANT.



I HAVE visited the sick a good deal in my time, and have ever found that a serious illness is one of the greatest softeners of a rugged nature. I have noticed it in workhouse and in hospital as well as in the dreary habitations that are occupied by the poor. Perhaps it is more noticeable in men than in women, and in many cases it has seemed to me to bring forth nature's gentility where it has for years,

perhaps, been encrusted with rude, rugged ways.

One of my most genuine gentlemen by nature was a quaint old sergeant of dragoons, living in ill-health upon his little pension, and at the wish of some people in the country near our old home, I sought him out, and found him, after some trouble, in one of the little streets of Walworth, and imparted to him my mission, namely, to inquire if he could tell me the whereabouts

of one John Morris and his wife, relatives of the farming people who asked me to inquire.

I found the sergeant, a stern, rugged old fellow, in his lodgings, and he looked surly at me, being, as I afterwards found, in pain, and he saluted me with a harsh “Well, ma’am, what’s for you? I’m not in the humour for visitors now.”

“I will not keep you long,” I said, and stated my business.

“Oh, that’s it, is it?” he said. “I thought you came to preach at me, and tell me what a wicked old man I am. There, bless your heart, I knowed it well enough, none better. John Morris, eh?”

“Yes, and his wife, do you know where they are?”

“Dead, ma’am, dead, both of them: gone to where there’s rest and peace, and no more sorrow; ‘where the wicked cease from troubling, and the weary——’ You know the rest. Know them! Of course. John Morris was in my troop—B troop, 25th Dragoon Guards; smart, fresh-coloured, honest Lincolnshire lad—a good lad; without any of the general rough ways of a soldier: for there’s good sort of fellows among us, as well as the sweepings of towns and villages; and I loved that lad as if he’d been my own son. Why? Because he was a thorough soldier, every inch of him. He came to me to ‘list—I was recruiting sergeant then. ‘Think twice of it, my lad,’ I says; ‘ours is a rough life;’ for from his talk I found he’d been having some tiff at home; so ‘think twice of it, my lad,’ I says: for I did not want to see a fine young fellow throw himself away. And it is that, you know, though it don’t sound loyal of me, as an old troop-sergeant-major, to say so; and feeling this—though I knew I should

make a profit of the young fellow—I did not like to see him 'list, when a 'rough' would have done just as well. But he would do it ; he was set upon it ; and told me that if I didn't take him, he would join the foot-regiment quartered in the town. So seeing how things stood, and sooner than he should do that, I gave him the shilling, and he entered one of the smartest heavy cavalry regiments in the service.

" I always liked him for his frank, honest, open manner, and the way he set to work to learn his duties —riding-school, foot-drill, sword-exercise,—no matter what it was, he worked at it ; learned quietly and cheerfully ; and in a wonderfully short time made himself a smart soldier. You never heard him snubbed for dirty belts or rusty accoutrements ; everything belonging to him shone like silver or gold ; while his horse was groomed till its skin was like satin. The men called him 'Model Jack ;' for whenever some one on parade was having it for want of smartness, without pausing for a moment, the captain, or major, would shout, 'Rein back, John Morris,' tell the one in trouble to look at him and his traps, and then order so much punishment-drill.

" But we all liked John Morris ; and there was not a man in the troop would have said a word against him, or done him an ill turn ; for wasn't he always ready to help a mate who was sick, or do a turn for a young beginner ? But he was only a weak man, and he must do what no soldier who has any respect for a woman should do—he must get in love with a nice pretty little body, who was foolish enough to take a fancy to the fine smart young fellow. Seeing what a superior sort of lass she was, if it had been any other

man in the troop, I'd have done what I could to stop it ; but knowing the lad's character—no smoker, no drinker ; but one who spent all his spare time in the barrack reading-room—I couldn't say a word ; and so matters went on till we got the route, and were to be shifted from Edinburgh to Hounslow.

“ Next time I saw John Morris, I knew there was something the matter ; and after stable he comes to me, and in a blunt, straightforward way, he says—

“ ‘ Sergeant, I want to be married. Will you speak to the officers for me ? ’

“ ‘ No, my lad,’ I says, ‘ I won’t.’

“ He started, and looked surprised ; for I was gruff ; while as a rule I was always as friendly to him as I could be to a private—though there wasn’t a man in the troop who speaking honestly would tell you I was ever a bully.

“ ‘ Look here, my lad,’ I says : ‘ if you respect that little lass, you’ll just say good-bye to her kindly, and for good ; or else tell her to wait till you can buy yourself out, and go into something civilian.’

“ ‘ But——’ he began.

“ ‘ There, hold your tongue, my lad ; and just go up to the married men’s quarters, and look at the want of common comforts in the accommodation ; look at the misery of their life ; and then, if you’re not satisfied, go and look at the poor women who are not on the strength of the regiment—married without leave, you know—and see whether you’d like to see your little maid brought down to that.’

“ ‘ But I’ve always done my duty, sergeant, and the colonel would give me leave to be married, and I’d do more to make her comfortable than——’

“ ‘ Major Ellis wants Sergeant Rollin,’ shouts some one ; and, seeing that was me, I jumped up.

“ ‘ But you’ll ask for me, sergeant ? ’ says John Morris, getting hold of my hand as he looked in my face.

“ ‘ Be off with you, sir, to your duty,’ I roared fiercely ; and he went away, and so did I, and, as a matter of course—stupidly, as I told myself—I spoke to the major, and he said he’d speak to the colonel ; but it was no use, for there were three more men married than there should have been by rights, and they could not have so many women and children in barracks.

“ I told Morris afterwards, and he thanked me, and went about his duties till the day for marching came, and then I found out that John had married without leave, and, of course, punishment must follow as soon as it was known. I would not see it ; but it was reported by another sergeant, and, as a matter of course, the poor weak lad was placed in arrest. I say weak ; but, there, I don’t know—the poor things loved one another very dearly ; and the official orders, though they’re strong, ain’t so strong as human nature.

“ He never grumbled or said anything about his punishment, but bore it all like a man, though he was anxious enough about his little wife, who travelled by parly train as far as their money would go, and walked the rest of the way up to Hounslow. And then there was the regular misery and struggle for the next few years : the poor little lass not being acknowledged by the regiment as one of the soldiers’ wives and having to lodge out of barracks, and live as best she could upon the beggarly pittance her husband could give her,

helped out by what she, poor little thing, with her baby, could earn.

“ I wasn’t going to jump upon a fallen man, but I know John Morris thought deeply upon my words as he saw the smart pleasant-faced little body sinking day by day into a drudge. I never said a word about it to him, nor he to me ; but I did what I could to help him, though that wasn’t much.

“ Then came another shift of quarters, and Mary Morris had a hundred and sixty miles to tramp to the next town we were stationed at ; but she did it without a murmur, and a few days after we reached our quarters I saw her at the barrack-gate.

“ We were not there very long, but had to make a fresh start, and this time it was with two little children that Mary Morris tramped after the regiment, to reach her husband nearly a fortnight after we had settled down—she looking worn out and haggard with trouble and her long journey. To have seen her now, no one would have known her for the bonnie little lass whom I had seen resting so lovingly upon the lad’s arm in Edinburgh town. But there, it was the usual lot of a soldier’s wife who is not on the strength ; and from town to town the poor girl followed us about till the very last ; and so long as she could be near her husband I believe the little thing was happy.

“ I said till the last ; for there came a day when I stood at the barrack-gate with tears in my eyes, that I was quite ashamed of, to see John Morris, the fine stalwart dragoon, in full marching order, leaning down from his horse, his gauntlet glove off, holding his little wife’s hand tightly clasped, as he gazed into her loving eyes—eyes as brimful of tears



"WITH A DASH LIKE A THUNDERBOLT WE WERE UPON 'THEM'"—(see p. 118).

and affection as were those of the captain's sister, leaning out of her carriage-window, and waving her handkerchief to her brother.

"Then came the trumpet-calls, and we were off, leaving many a tearful eye behind. But Mary Morris turned up again at the port where we were to embark; for it was only the sea that could stay the faithful little woman from following her husband. But there was the sea now; and we were ordered abroad for ten years, to a country that would be the grave of many of us, as I well knew.

"I'm not sure, but I think that was Mary Morris's face I saw, all pale and drawn, in one of the boats just pushed off; but it soon faded from sight as the steam-tug drew our great ship down the river; and then, as I turned away, heavy-hearted and dull at leaving the old country, I met the eyes of poor John Morris, when he must have thought of my words before his marriage, for he groaned, and, poor fellow, his head went down upon his arms on the bulwarks, and I could see his great, broad chest heaving as he sobbed and cried like a little child.

"Time went on, and up the country we had our work cut out. I'm no lover of butchery, but I'm a soldier by trade, and always tried to do my duty. More than one battle I had been in, to come out scathless—the last time owing to a swinging sabre-cut given to a Sikh who was about to shoot me down, and it was not my hand that gave that sabre-cut, but the hand of John Morris.

Then came another fierce engagement, when, worn out with heat and thirst, the order came to charge. The moment before, the men were drooping and list-

less ; but as the trumpet rang out, eyes lit up, bronzed faces flushed a deeper hue, and we trotted steadily, knee to knee, over the plain, nearing the enemy at every stride. John Morris was on my left, and I could not help smiling to think what a good man and true I had by my side ; when the trumpet call again rang out 'gallop,' and on we went until within a hundred yards of the foe, when again came the loud blast ; spurs were used, and with a dash like a thunderbolt we were upon them. I recollect the sharp, ringing volley they gave us as we came down, and about the air bearing a strange, shrill cry ; after which it was one wild, fierce struggle, till I found myself breathless and faint, trying to free myself from my horse, who was down, pinning me to the ground. A violent drag set me at liberty, just as the poor beast made its last effort to rise, and fell back dead.

"I will not sicken you with the scene around me, one that I tried to leave behind ; but I had not limped many paces before a faint voice cried after me, 'Sergeant !' and turning, there, raising himself upon his elbow, was poor John Morris, with a look that I shall never forget upon his face. There were plenty of horrors about, but I had eyes only for the poor fellow before me, and kneeling down, I supported his head and tried to stanch his wounds.

"'No good ! no good !' he whispered. 'I'm cut to piecer. Done my duty, sergeant, though it was hard work not to desert when I had to leave her. Find her ; tell her I was true to the last, and—Cowards !' he cried.

"At the same moment, almost, I started up, but half-a-dozen horsemen were upon me, and I was cut down and knew no more.

“ It was years after when I saw England again, and tried to find out poor Mary—the weak, simple-hearted girl who had been left behind. I tried hard, but for a long time without any result, till one day I met by chance another woman who had been in the same plight..

“ ‘ Can I tell you where she is?’ she said, ‘ yes ; come with me and I’ll show you.’

“ I hung back for a moment, thinking of the sad news I had to tell ; but duty’s duty, and I followed the woman from street to street, for quite half an hour, during which time I’d made up the words I meant to say, and was ready with my message, meaning, too, to tell poor Mary where she could draw the pay due to her husband. But I never delivered my message, for turning to the woman I said, ‘ is it much farther ? ’

“ ‘ No,’ she said, ‘ close here ; and I’d have been with her, but for the hope that my poor boy would some day come back.’

“ I hung back again, but she took hold of my arm as she stopped by an iron gate, and pointed to a multitude of green mounds, saying—

“ ‘ They laid her there, somewhere, two years ago now, but I don’t know which was the grave ; for poor folks die fast, and people don’t put stones up for soldiers’ wives.’

“ ‘ Do you know what she died of?’ I said, softly, for I was shocked and surprised.

“ ‘ Died of ? ’ said the woman bitterly ; ‘ what I should have died of, only I was too hard—died because her husband was dragged away, and her little ones went one after the other : died of a broken heart ! a poor, gentle thing, praying that they might meet again.’

“ Yes ; that mark was left when the Sikh cut me down, as I held poor John Morris’s head ; and now if you please, ma’am, we’ll change the subject, for when I get talking about other people’s sorrows that old wound begins to throb.”



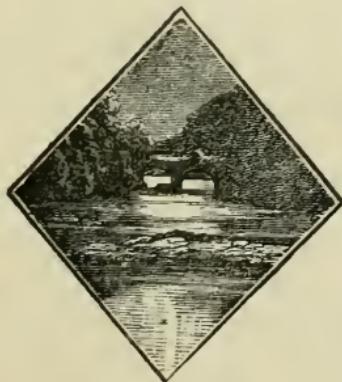
"But I have," he said, "and she has gone home."

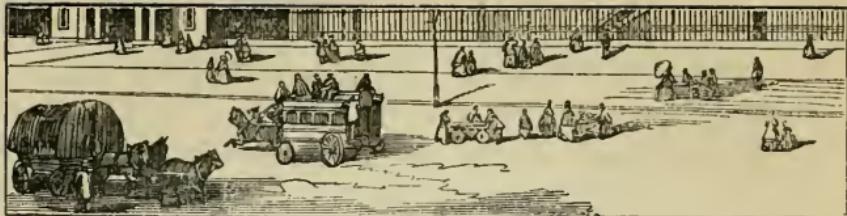
"Quite cured?" I said.

"Quite cured! Bah! It was easy enough. My doctoring was no good, what she wanted was to see the gentleman again whom she believed to have slighted her. I set people to work to find him. They found him, and the poor child has recovered rapidly and I don't believe she well can have a relapse. It was all a mistake or a misunderstanding that was all, and now matters are as happy as the day is long."

I could not help wishing then that he might as easily solve the cause of so many others' terrible state; but when I hinted at such a thing he shook his head.

"Such cases as hers are easy to manage, Miss Stoneleigh; I wish I could deal with my other patients as well."





CHAPTER XII.

SOMEBODY DEAD.



GOING about the streets of London on errands of mercy, naturally makes one observant of everything that seems in any way connected with trouble or sorrow. If I see a family moving, with all the discomforts of leaving one home for another, I immediately begin to wonder whether it is a voluntary affair or whether it is the result of misfortune.

Again, a funeral always takes my attention and I find myself wondering whether the mourners could be helped or comforted by me, and I note whether the dead is young or old by the funeral trappings, and too often see that it is some tender child, though the grief is as great or greater when it is some dear wife or mother, or may be the father—the stay of some family.

My friends ought to consider me a doleful miserable person but they do not, and they never think it eccentric of me to take so much interest in houses with the window blinds drawn or shutters up, but rather give me their sympathy and help.

Noticing such matters it will be no cause for surprise

that I had often marked the black crape band worn upon the arm of their uniform coats by soldiers and volunteers. The first time then that I saw driver after driver of the omnibuses along a busy line of route with a tiny black crape bow fastened on his whip I naturally became eager to know why this was, or rather who might be the important personage to whom the sign of respect was paid.

I felt as if I could give anything for an hour's chat with one of the drivers, but how was it to be obtained? I knew they were for long hours upon the box, and that during the short time they were at home it would be hard work to get either of them to tell me what I wanted, so I set to and pondered.

I don't know that I should have felt any compunction in taking a seat outside an omnibus, though now-a-days it would seem a very out of the way place for a lady in London streets. But I thought that if I could find one going out through the suburbs to some pleasant village it would be no more extraordinary than for a lady to take a seat upon a stage coach for a ride through one of the outlying districts beyond the reach of the rail.

The difficulty was solved, for I thought of the Richmond omnibuses, and making my way to the White Horse Cellar, in Piccadilly, I found no difficulty, for a ladder was placed for me, and I was able to climb to the vacant seat beside the driver, who looked at me askant as if suspicious of me. I saw him give a peculiar look at the conductor, and I smiled to myself as I nestled beneath the great tarpaulin apron, and watched the care with which he guided his two stout well-fed horses through the maze of conveyances, the crape bow like a

strange black butterfly seeming to flit to and fro before my eyes.

Nothing to him is the task, as through narrow channels he steers his way, pouncing upon a passenger here, another there; rarely using his whip, never in collision, but stopping short now in obedience to a "ting" from the conductor's bell; started again by the same means; and seeming to have that huge, heavily-laden vehicle, with twenty-eight people in and upon it, as much under control as if he sat a few inches from the ground in a pony-drawn basket carriage, driving in a country road.

But here it was again and again, a crape bow upon whip after whip, and many of those whip handles, and their holders' elbows, raised in the well known salute to my driver, though it seems strange that when drivers salute each other they should always do it in that singular elbowish way, their eyes being all the while carefully inspecting their fellow's horses.

Somebody important must be dead for there to be so general a display of mourning, and I soon found out that I was right. Somebody of consequence had passed away.

No one of the Royal Family, surely? No. Not an eminent statesman, or the papers would have recorded the fact. Man of science, philanthropist, preacher, teacher, author, actor, musician? No, none of these. Somebody of importance? Yes; somebody of importance.

To the world?

Yes, to his own little world.

Who might it be then?

An omnibus driver.

But you said a man of importance !

Yes ; a man of importance—the father of a family, the man whose patient toil produced, Saturday night by Saturday night, the sum of money that should keep respectably his wife and six little ones ;—the man who had no rest on Sundays ; but seven days a week—hail, rain, sunshine, or bitter frost—goes on his monotonous journeys for fourteen, fifteen, sixteen hours per day, with hardly time allowed him to supply the wants of nature—a rough-looking, weather-stained, hoarse-voiced, ignorant man ; but a true, faithful husband, a loving father, and a patient toiler—the sole prop, stay, support of the weeping ones at home.

A man of importance called away from this busy, competitive, stirring world—somebody of importance dead, gainsay it who will.

So I found from my driver, who, after being exceedingly gruff and distant for a time, gradually seemed to thaw, and, as I asked question after question, became quite loquacious, as he made the black crape butterfly flit from side to side in the act of caressing his horses with the whip. I did not see him lash them once ; and at last he spoke out as if he had known me for years.

“ Seems a sort of mark of respect for the poor chap, and we generally do it. Worth nothing, of course, for a kind thought and an honest tear in memory of an old friend’s worth, to my way of thinking, all the crape and black feathers and velvet palls, and hearses and mourning coaches, in the world. Don’t say I’m right, ma’am ; and though I talk of tears I don’t say that I drop em. I leave that for the women to do, but I’ve had a few thoughts about poor Sam, who got off

his box come Sunday three weeks dead beat, poor chap."

No, my driver did not seem at all the man given to tears, but in consequence of the cutting wind blowing right into our faces, there was a slight humidity in his eyes, and he sniffed twice very loudly, and then put his whip in the hand that held the reins, took off his hat, and fished out a red cotton handkerchief, with which he blew his nose loudly.

"Strange bad colds we ketches up on the box here sometimes," he said apologetically. "It's enough to kill anybody—the hours are so long; but then, it's no use to grumble—not a bit. If you don't like it you can go, and there's hundreds of men who can handle the ribbons ready to pop into your seat. It's a precious sight easier to get out of collar than it is to get in again, I can tell you; so I don't grumble, but keep on.

"Look healthy? well, pr'aps I do; but all this red colour in one's face ain't fresh air and weather. One's drops have something to do with it, for some chaps may stand it, I dare say, but I can't, and I find a drop of beer with some gin in it warms you better than most things. I like temperance as well as any man, but I really can't do without a drop in the bitter weather, and those who can must be made of different stuff to me.

"Now, take one of our London winter days—which you like—a regular keen frost, or a yaller fog, or a soaking rain, or one of those cold, mizzly, clinging, go-through-your-very-marrow sort of days. Get your breakfast in a hurry, and be off to the yard and get on the box. All's ready for us, for we don't clean horses or 'busses; there's men on purpose to do that. Well, I'm well wrapped up, and I get on my box at eight

o'clock in the morning, and begin my City journey. There we are all times ; we mustn't go no faster, nor we mustn't go no slower ; time's time, and we have to keep it if we can, but sometimes we can't, and do what we will, we're late—with extra passengers, or a block, or something wrong with a horse, or one thing or another ; and then, if it happens to be near dinner time, we have to start back as usual, and often and often, I haven't got off the box, but swallowed a mouthful of something where I sat, and been off again.

“ Drive, drive, and pull up, all the afternoon, with about five or six minutes for my tea, and then up and at it again, hour after hour, till the last journey's done, and then I've got off the box hardly able to stand, I've been so cramped ; while scarcely ever before eleven, and generally twelve, I've got home, worn out, to my bit of supper. Fifteen or sixteen hours, Sunday and week-day, is too much of a good thing, ain't it ? And on such days as I've been talking about, when you can't feel your feet, and your hands won't hardly hold rein or whip, and the cold goes through and through you, don't you think as one wants something to comfort one a bit ? because if you don't, I should like them as grumbles to try it on for a month and see.

“ Coats, of course, keeps out a deal, but the coat ain't been made that will keep out all the cold and wet. Oilskins and macintoshes always acts on me rheumatically, and gives me pains all over in the jynts ; so I puts on as many reg'lar coats and weskits as I can get on one above another, and wraps up my legs. But in all that long time, it's no use, the cold creeps in somewhere like the thin edge of a wedge, and lets in ever so much more, and though we mostly gets a

shilling or so a day more than the conductors, I don't know but what I'd rather have their life, on account of the jumping up and down.

"I get very tired of it by the time night comes ; but a good sleep and the little bit of home comfort one gets seems to put one right before morning, though, I'm blest if I think a sea captain could know much less of his children than we 'bus drivers do of ours. But there, it can't last for ever, and I s'pose some day I shall be lifted off my box as Sam was. Couldn't get down, poor chap, for he stuck to it right to the very last, though his missis wanted him to lay up long before.

"'Just for a few days, Sam,' she says, but he shook his head, poor chap, thinking of pay night, and not wanting to go on his club ; and so she used to wait at a corner for him, and bring him drops of warm broth and cups of tea, and little things she thought he'd fancy, for the poor fellow was like a horse off his feed ; but it was all of no use.

"I used to drive mostly the 'bus that went afore his and used to see her, pale-faced and anxious, waiting at the corner till he came, which was only ten minutes after mine—this being a busy time, you know ; and Sam and I having been friends, I used to nod to her, for it's no use to come the reg'lar s'loot with the whip you know. But, as I said afore, it was all no use ; and Sam got worse and worse—reg'lar touched, poor chap—and one night, as he was coming back off his last journey, pulls up sudden like aside the road gives the office with his whip to the conductor, and then drops the reins. Held out to the very last he had, like a Briton, and then as I said they had to lift him down,

when the conductor sent him home in a cab, collected the fares, then got up and drove the rest of the journey himself.

“ Terrible bad Sam was, poor chap, and first one and then another of us went to sit up with him, for he was delirious best part of the time. My turn came twice over, and I went after I’d had a bit of supper—tripe and onions, and a drop o’ dog’s nose we had that night, and out and out it was, too, for my missus said that them as sat up with sick people ought allus to have something supporting—which I say, you know, just to show that we didn’t have tripe and onions every night ; for, you know, the wages wouldn’t run to it.

“ So I gets there and finds all made comfortable and him bedded down for the night—for his missus was as good a sort as ever a driver married : snug bit of fire ; kettle singing on the hob ; easy chair aside the fire, Sam’s medicine on a little table, ready to give him when he woke up ; one of his rugs to wrap round me when I got shivery towards morning ; and my medicine on the chimney-piece—drop of gin, tumbler, teaspoon, and sugar, with half a lemon on a plate.

“ ‘ I’ll come down about five, and make you a cup of tea,’ says Sam’s wife.

“ ‘ No you won’t,’ I says gruffly. ‘ I’ll call you about seven,’ I says, ‘ for I must be off then ; so you’d better get a good-night’s rest.

“ She didn’t say much, for, poor thing ! she’d got into a way then of breaking down and crying at the least word ; but she went and straightened Sam’s bed a bit, just as you’ve seen a woman do when the bed don’t want touching ; then she leaned over and kissed him, and went off upstairs with the children.

“ Plain furnished place theirs was ; but, bless you, it was like a little palace, for Sam’s wife had a knack of making things show off to the best advantage, and that, too, without being one of them horrible cleaning women, who seems to think as furniture and carpets was made a purpose to be rubbed up and shook, while floors wasn’t for nothing else but scrubbing.

“ Sam seemed fast asleep, and after giving a look at him I made myself as comfortable as I could in the easy chair, with the rug, in front of the fire, and sat there thinking about the onions I had for supper. Not as I wanted to, you know, but onions is things as will make you think about ‘em afterwards, and that ain’t the worst of it, for they takes precious good care that every one else shall know you’ve had ‘em. About half-past two I had a weak mixing of gin and water, and all that time poor Sam hadn’t stirred ; but just as I’d finished my glass, which was about three, for I took time over it and smoked a pipe, sending all the smoke up the chimney—just as I’d done I heard Sam stir and say something ; but he was quiet again directly, and my orders were to wait till he asked for his medicine. So all I had to do was to sit still and wait.

“ It was hard work keeping awake between four and five, but I managed it ; for I took off my boots, and walked up and down the room softly, trying to count up how many streets I passed on the near side from Piccadilly to the Mansion House and how many coming back again ; and though I tried at it for an hour, I never got it right, for the streets seemed to dodge from one side to the other, and bothered me ; but I kept awake, and sat down at five o’clock, feeling rather shivery, to another taste of gin and water, and all that

time poor Sam never moved—only breathed softly when I went to listen.

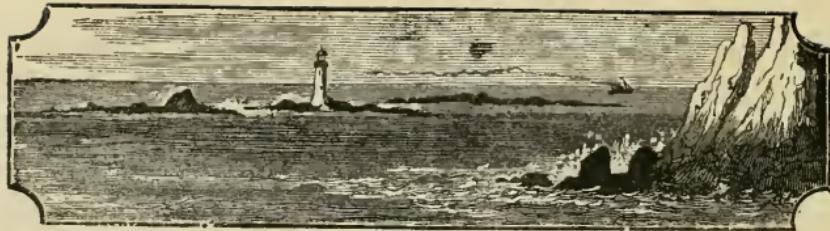
“ Seven o’clock came at last by Sam’s watch, standing in the little sand-castle on the chimney-piece ; and then I called his wife gently, and in a few minutes more she was down, and wanted to get me some breakfast ; but I said ‘ No ! ’ for I knew it would be ready at home ; and I was just going when I heard her give a shriek by the bedside, and down she went upon the floor —fainted dead away.

“ He never give more than a sigh, mum, or I must have heerd him ; for my eyes never closed that night, and though p’raps last time I looked I ought to have seen it, yet, not thinking of anything, my sight being not so keen as that of his own wife, who, poor woman ! I lifted into a chair, and called for help.

“ That’s what the bits of crape are for, mum, it’s a way we have with us. What complaint ? Well, I only have my ideas, and thinks that if you run a hoss too hard he’s soon wore out, and I fancy as men can be run too hard as well. It seems to me as Natur’ never meant men to keep on day after day all them hours at a stretch ; and though it ain’t like hard labour, yet you’re at it all the time ; and, besides, what were Sundays made for if not for a rest ? Seems to me, mum, that if a day of rest hadn’t been wanted, Sunday would have been left out altogether, and we should have gone right on from Saturday to Monday at once.

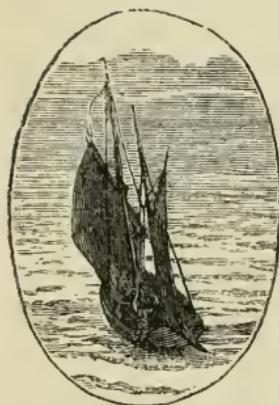
“ P’raps ’tain’t for me to complain ; but I have my own ideas about poor Sam.”





CHAPTER XIII.

HAVING PATIENCE.



MUCH living in London and the constant unvarying round of life does tell upon the constitution as in the case of the poor driver, and I was feeling heavy and sad beyond my wont in a way that excited the notice of my friends. The Hendricks were the first to speak about it, and with affectionate solicitude Mr. Hendrick

begged that I would listen to his advice.

“ You know how bad I was,” he said, “ and what the country did for me. Go and spend a month or two by the seaside.”

“ And what is to become of my London friends and my poor ? ” I said.

“ What is to become of your London friends and your poor,” he said quickly, “ if you droop from over work, take to your bed, and die. Come, take my advice. Why, Hetty,” he said, “ how would it be if she went and stayed with the Ross’s in Cornwall ? ”

“ Cornwall ? ” I exclaimed, “ so far away ? ”

“ So far away,” he said laughing, “ why no part of England’s far away now. You can start from Paddington at mid-day and be there the same night. Besides, John Ross is a medical man and a sensible fellow. He is a dear friend of mine, and I’ll be bound to say he and his wife and the Cornish air will send you back better than ever.”

“ Are—are they very grand people,” I faltered.

“ Grand? no. They’ve a nice place and garden and are doing well, but they’ve known what it was to struggle, and are simplicity itself. I know them as well almost as I know myself. We went down and stayed with them when we were married and very welcome the sum we paid for board and lodging was to them then. They kept nothing from us and I remember well the poor fellow’s struggles and despair.

“ ‘ Don’t take on about it darling don’t, pray,’ little Mrs. Ross would whisper. ‘ Have patience and all will be well,’ and she’d leave her untouched breakfast and kneel at her husband’s feet so that she could lay her hands upon his breast and let her blue eyes look up appealingly in his.

“ ‘ How can I be patient?’ he exclaimed angrily, and frowning as he spoke. But his anger was not such but that he could caressingly rest one hand upon the soft wavy hair, and draw the loving head closer to his bosom. ‘ But there; go and sit down: it’s eleven now, and we shall never have done breakfast. Give me another cup of tea.’

“ ‘ But you have not drunk that, dear,’ said Mrs. Ross gently, as she returned to her seat at the breakfast-table.

“ ‘ Haven’t I?’ said her husband absently. ‘ Oh!

no, of course not. But, there ; I don't want any breakfast, this constant anxiety frets away appetite.'

"But you will have something for that case last night, love ? You were there from twelve till five.'

"Mr. Ross smiled, as he replied, 'Yes, I shall have something—thanks, and blessings, and that sort of payment. The people were too poor to go to old Tomkins—too proud to go to the union—so they came to me, and of course I went. That was right, was it not ?'

"Of course, love,' replied Mrs. Ross. 'How could you stay away, when you had it in your power to do good to a fellow-creature ? But will the man live, do you think ?'

"Mr. Ross shook his head. 'I'm afraid not. He may linger on for months ; but the foundation has been sapped by excess.'

"God help his poor family,' murmured Mrs. Ross, and then she rose and crossed the room to where her husband was irritably walking up and down before the window. The breakfast, with its thin tea and rank butter, lay untasted still, and a child-like little servant-girl appearing at the door, Mrs. Ross gave her a nod, and the untouched meal was removed.

"Once more alone, that anxious wife softly stole one little hand beneath her husband's arm, and creeping closer and closer, walked with him up and down the worn drugget, till he stopped short as if gazing from the window, but really looking inward at his own position, his wife refraining from speaking a word, as she anxiously watched the working of his countenance.

"For the Ross folks, as people in Elmouth called them were in sad straits. Some two years before,

with a little money in hand, John Ross had come to settle with his young wife in the pleasant seaside town, having made his calculations that he would get no practice as the new doctor for the first year—at least none to signify—but that he could furnish his house quietly, and live decently for that first year; while what little he did earn would go to his remaining stock of cash, and add to what he gained during the second year, which he hoped would be something, if not considerable, at least enough to enable them to what he called ‘rub along.’

“ But John Ross did not know the ignorance and prejudices of small country towns, and he soon found that he was looked down upon with contempt by the old practitioner; not known by those who considered themselves the gentry of the place; and viewed generally with suspicion by the poorer and middle classes. He might have possessed the skill of the Royal College of Surgeons condensed into one man, but the people of Elmouth would still have shaken their heads at him. And knowing all this, Tomkins, the old surgeon, used to chuckle and rub his hands, killing some, curing others, and year by year growing richer, telling himself that the new man would soon grow tired and go, for after all said and done, it was a great piece of impudence to come and set up in Elmouth without his leave. Why, did not Cheeseman, his assistant, set up in opposition after a quarrel, and go to the dogs in three months? At least that was what old Tomkins said, for Cheeseman’s going to the dogs was really going back to London to his friends, till he could obtain another situation as assistant.

“ But things had gone very crookedly with the Ross people, and in spite of every exertion, John Ross found himself at the end of two years and some months penniless, and without a chance of bettering his position. It seemed as if the people would have none of him, and again and again he was for trying some other place. But after a long discussion his wife and he always bore in mind the old proverb of a rolling stone gathering no moss, and knowing that it would be like going through their troubles again, without money, they concluded that it would be better to fight on hopefully, keeping their poverty hidden as much as possible, and waiting patiently for better days.

“ But though it was easy enough to talk of keeping their poverty hidden, that is no slight matter in a country town ; and if John Ross and his wife could have known all, they would have found that the Elmouth people generally knew the extent of their wardrobes ; how much to a shilling they owed baker and butcher ; how that their landlord fully expected they would give him notice from quarter to quarter, and had promised the first offer of the house to some one else. In short, their affairs were made out to be so bad, that people used to shake their heads, and wonder how folks could be so proud, and keep up appearances as them Ross’s did, when they were almost starving, Lord bless you !

“ John Ross would never take any notice of the small tattling of the people, or he might have resented the fact that Tomkins had spoken very disparagingly of his ability. But he was too wise a man. He hoped that times would mend, and gave every spare minute to the study of his profession, working late into every

night, and merely taking such exercise as was absolutely necessary for his health.

“ But it must not be imagined that no practice fell to his share, for the poor flocked to him in spite of the ill success that attended his efforts in the first year of his coming. In fact, Tomkins made great capital out of the death of a fever patient whom Mr. Ross was called in to attend, when the young surgeon had told his wife that he was convinced that no human power could have saved the stricken one. However, people would talk and shake their heads, and say what a pity it was such an inexperienced person had been called in, *et cetera*; and it was not until the young surgeon had performed several clever cures in advice gratis cases that the poorer people favoured him with their patronage, giving him much trouble, few thanks, and seldom any pay.

“ ‘ Look at that,’ said John Ross one day, as two nurses passed the window in charge of a perambulator fitted with an awning, and containing a fine-looking boy of some twelve months old—‘ look at that,’ he said bitterly. ‘ Why, I should think what is spent upon that child in nurses and dress would be a comfortable income for us. It is enough to make any man envious to see how unequally money is distributed. There are those people, the Westerns, rolling in wealth, and without labour to gain it, while the more I fight and struggle, the worse off I am. What do they know of trouble? Hetty, my girl,’ he cried passionately, ‘ I wish I had never married you, to drag you down to this poverty! ’

“ ‘ Hush! oh, hush, darling! ’ sobbed Mrs. Ross, the tears streaming down her cheeks. ‘ Have we not

been happy through it all, and have I ever seemed to mind? Be patient, and times will brighten; but please—please—don't—speak—'

Mrs. Ross could say no more, for her sobs choked her utterance. Her husband's words had seemed to cut her to the heart, for of late he had grown more bitter and less hopeful. Instead of flying to his books for comfort, and studying hard, he had grown moody and peevish in spite of her loving attentions; and many a night while he slept had her pillow been wet with tears as she vainly tried to pierce the cloud of gloom that seemed to close them in on every side.

"His wife's tears were not without effect, and the next moment John Ross was kissing them away, vowing that he would be hopeful and contented, fighting out the battle till the very last; for, as he said, the tide must turn some time.

"'What a bear I am, darling,' he cried, 'to mope and growl as I do, envying, hating, and maliciously regarding my neighbours because they make money and I don't. There, never mind! I'll make old Tomkins want me for partner yet, and—there! if you haven't sent out the breakfast things again, and I'm as hungry as a hunter.'

"It was of no use, John Ross would not own to its being pretence. He insisted upon the breakfast things being brought back, and ate bread-and-butter, and drank weak tea, insisting at the same time upon his wife partaking of the piece of toast he made for her himself.

"An hour after he was making notes, and eagerly studying up a case reported in the medical journals, now shaking his head and calling his wife's attention

to what he considered fallacies, or great blunders, and pointing out what would have been his course under the circumstances—not dwelling upon it with any show of assumption, but proving all he said step by step from the experience of those learned in the great science of medicine.

“ And in spite of her aching heart, and their poverty, Mrs. Ross’s eye lighted up, and her nostrils dilated with pride as, letting her needlework fall in her lap, she gazed upon the high, slightly bald forehead, and deep thoughtful eye of her husband, as wrapped in the case before him, his whole being seemed to dilate, and he in fancy performed some great cure.

“ ‘ If he had had opportunity,’ she thought to herself, and then sighing resumed her task, one that betokened a change at hand in their little household, with helplessness and expense attendant, and she sighed again, but only to check herself, and look anxiously to see whether her husband had noticed her despondency.

“ But John Ross was too busily intent upon his studies, toiling on eagerly till called to visit some unremunerative patient, from whom he returned weary and worn to renew his work.

“ Work was his only resource ; and but for his constant application, life would have been almost a burden, from the hope deferred that maketh the heart sick.

“ Two months had glided by, and their affairs were at such a low ebb that John Ross would have given way utterly to despair, had he been alone. But he dared not, for now it was his turn to solace and comfort. Complaining for so long of his poverty, he had been unaware that it had pleased heaven to make him rich

—a wealth that in his blindness he could not see, until he had thrown himself sobbing upon his knees by his wife's bedside to pray forgiveness for his murmurings, and that heaven would be merciful and not take away the spirit then flickering, hovering, as it were, between this world and that which is to come.

“For there had been a bitter struggle in that little poorly-furnished chamber, and more than once John Ross had felt that he would be left to fight the battle alone. But the change that came had been for the better, and now, pale and tottering when she tried to cross the room, Hetty Ross was once more down, able no longer to give consolation, but glad to take it herself.

“Her face was very, very pale, but at times it would light up with such a smile of ineffable joy, that her husband would forget his studies, and sit breathlessly watching the young mother's countenance, as in the pride of first maternity, her gaze lingered where, in its cradle, there was something whose breathing gently raised and let fall the warm coverlid. Then the parents' eyes would meet, and with the husband at the wife's feet, all worldly trouble would be forgotten in that happiness given to all that are true of heart.

“Another month glided by, and by some means or other John Ross still struggled on, even hopefully, for his wife had grown almost strong again, and her strength gave energy to him in his efforts.

“They were seated at breakfast once more, when Mrs. Ross spoke.

“‘Such sad news, dear.’

“‘What is it?’ said her husband, not raising his eyes from the paper.

“ ‘ You remember saying that the Westerns, with their wealth, did not know care ? ’

“ ‘ Ah—yes ! one says plenty of stupid and bitter things when in trouble,’ said John Ross. ‘ But what is it ? ’

“ ‘ Jane tells me their little boy is dying.’

“ ‘ Never ! ’ exclaimed Mr. Ross, starting. ‘ What, that fine little fellow that looked heartiest of the hearty ? ’

“ ‘ I fear so. Jane heard it from one of the nurses, who says the Westerns are almost heart-broken, and the poor woman sobbed herself as she spoke of it. It seems that they wanted to have more advice, but Mr. Tomkins said it was not necessary, and now it seems it is too late.’

“ ‘ Poor little chap ! ’ exclaimed Mr. Ross, dropping his paper, and gazing towards the cradle where his own child lay, by whose side Mrs. Ross was now kneeling, to assure herself of its safety. ‘ Poor little chap ! ’ he muttered again, and then aloud, ‘ God forgive me, Hetty ! What blind fools we are ! and I was envious of those people.’

“ Father and mother were bending over the cradle, when there came the rattle of wheels, a horse was dragged upon his haunches at the gate, the bell rang furiously, and as Mr. Ross hurriedly opened the door, the rich Mr. Western seized him by both hands.

“ ‘ For mercy’s sake, Mr. Ross, pray come ! My poor boy’s dying—half murdered by that man,’ and before he could recover from his surprise the surgeon was hurried hatless into a brougham, thrust in almost by the excited father, the horse was flogged, and John Ross just had time to wave an adieu to his wife at the win-

dow before the carriage was turned, and they were going at full gallop through the town towards the Hall.

“On their way Mr. Ross learned all the particulars he could respecting the child’s illness; how the family attendant had treated it as of little moment, and the child had gradually sunk, till as he finished his account Mr. Western exclaimed, in a voice choked with emotion

“‘And now I fear we are too late. Oh, that I had come last night !’

“‘Calm yourself,’ said Mr. Ross. ‘It may be that I could do no more than your regular attendant.’”

“‘Don’t tell me, sir !’ exclaimed the father angrily. ‘My child has been neglected—shamefully neglected. That man came to my house last night from some public dinner, and I feel sure now, though I did not detect it then, that he was ignorant of what he was doing. But quick, sir, follow me !’

“In another minute John Ross was in the chamber before the little sufferer, lying pale and wasted upon its weeping mother’s knees. For a moment the young surgeon was almost unmanned, when, looking to him as her last hope, the weeping woman raised her red eyes, and joined her hands supplicatingly, as if to say, ‘Oh, save—oh, save my child !’

“Wealth was there, glancing from every article of furniture in the handsome room, but the cold grim shade that visits the palace with the same stern justice as the lowly cottage, seemed to be also there waiting for a few brief moments ere he claimed his own.

“For a moment John Ross thought he was too late, and his brow knit with disappointment; but the next

instant he drew a long breath, and as if nerving himself to the struggle with the destroyer, he threw off his coat, knelt down, and softly lifted one blue lid, to gaze in the contracted pupil of the child's eye, and listened to its faint, sighing breath.

“ ‘ Cold water—towels—vinegar,’ he then said, in quick, firm tones. ‘ Now brandy. What have you there, arrowroot ? Yes ; good. Now the brandy—quick ! ’

“ Father and servants flew to execute his commands, and in a few seconds the tightly-closed lips were parted, and with difficulty a little brandy and arrowroot was swallowed. Towels saturated with vinegar and water were wrapped round the little golden head, and extemporizing a fan from an open book, the young surgeon placed the father at his child's head to keep up a sharp agitation of the air, and ran himself to throw open the window.

“ Directly after he was back, and watching the child with an earnestness barely equalled by its parents, as at intervals he spoke, after drawing out his watch and referring to it from time to time.

“ ‘ Look,’ he said, in short, peremptory tones : ‘ the eyes are unclosing, the pupils dilate already, there is a little more pulsation—that sigh was stronger. Keep up the fanning, sir ; now another towel, and colder water.’

Fresh applications were made, and then another anxious interval ensued, during which the dark shadow of death seemed to fade, and in a wondrous manner light—the faintest dawn of life—seemed to return into the child's face.

“ ‘ Good, so far ! ’ exclaimed Mr. Ross, while father

and mother watched him with an aspect almost approaching to the veneration that must have beamed in the face of the Shunammite woman when the ‘Man of God’ raised her child from the dead. And truly this seemed almost a miracle—the miracle of science given by the Great Creator to those who will study and learn His wonders.

“But now Mr. Ross was at a table, hurriedly writing out a prescription on a leaf of his pocket book.

“‘Take that,’ he said to Mr. Western—‘take it yourself to my wife, and bring back what she prepares.’

“‘To your wife?’ stammered the father.

“‘Yes, to my wife,’ said the young surgeon. ‘There, man, I’d trust my life to her accuracy, so do not be afraid.’

“With the obedience of a servant, Mr. Western hurried from the room, and in a few minutes more the sound of hoofs was heard upon the drive, as he galloped off himself to fetch the medicine.

“In less than half an hour Mr. Western was back, to find that the poor child had shown further signs of returning animation; the horrible convulsed look had left its countenance; its breathing was more regular, and already, with tears of gratitude, the mother was whispering her thanks. But Mr. Ross only shook his head, saying that the danger had been staved off for awhile, but that it was still imminent.

“Then taking the medicine from its bearer, he tasted, nodded his head in token of satisfaction, and with his own hands administered a small portion.

“‘Now, Mr. Western,’ he then said, fanning the

child's head furiously the while he spoke, 'we have done all we can do for the present, the rest must follow, and all depends upon good nursing. With your lady's consent, then, we will divide that between us ; but I feel it to be my duty to tell you that the child is in very, very great danger, and likely to be for some time. What we have to do now, is to try and make up for the waste of nature that has already taken place.'

"Then followed instructions for preparing the juice of meat, arrowroot, and that an ample supply of brandy should be at hand ; when, just as Mr. Ross was in the act of administering a little in the arrowroot, the door opened, and in walked the great practitioner, expressing great astonishment at seeing his fellow professional there.

"' You here, sir ? ' he exclaimed. ' This seems to be a most astounding breach of etiquette. Perhaps you will step with me into the next room.'

"' Mr. Tomkins ! ' exclaimed the father angrily, "I entrusted the life of my sick child in your hands. You neglected that trust—whether from ignorance or carelessness I will not say—'

"' Oh, indeed ! ' blustered the surgeon loudly, ' I can see through the trick ; charlatans and pretenders are always waiting to seize their opportunity ; and—good heavens ! ' he ejaculated as if in horror—' a dessert spoonful of strong brandy to a tender child like that.'

"Mr. Ross turned upon him fiercely, but recollected himself directly after, and kneeling down by his little patient, he proceeded to pour the diluted spirit, drop by drop, between the parted lips, watching eagerly the effect ; every tiny drop that trickled down seeming to brighten the eye, and give new life ; even as when the

effect passed off, the eye grew dim, and that life seemed slowly sinking away.

“The old surgeon made some further remark, but Mr. Western sternly ordered him to leave the room, when Mr. Ross rose from his knees.

“‘I could not speak before that man, sir,’ he said, ‘for he has heaped too many insults upon me since I have been in Elmouth; but I think that now, with careful watching and treatment, there may be some hope for the little one; and if you would prefer that your old attendant should take my place, I will directly leave.’

“As Mr. Ross spoke, his eye lighted for an instant upon Mrs. Western’s face, in which consternation was painted most plainly, but her husband took the young doctor’s hand, and in a broken voice said something respecting gratitude, and thanks, which he could not finish, for, worn out with watching and anxiety, he sank into a chair and wept like a child.

“Anxious hours followed, life appearing to be sustained by the strong spirit administered at intervals of ten or fifteen minutes, when the flame seemed to spring up vigorously, but only to slowly decline, and then begin to flicker and tremble, as if waiting for some stronger blast of air than usual to extinguish it for ever.

“And so on at every quarter-hour the little sufferer seemed to be snatched back, as it were, from the hands of death—all that day, all that night, and again the next day; and during that space the young surgeon never left the child’s side. Next night he lay down upon a sofa in the room for a few hours, but only to be awakened at four o’clock by the anxious father, who

dreaded that some change for the worse had taken place.

“ But the alarm was needless, though Mr. Ross once more took his place at the side of the little cot, working incessantly at his task with the earnestness of a man whose soul was in his profession. No night seemed too long, no watching too tedious, in his efforts to get the better of the great enemy with whom he was contending. If he was away for ten minutes he was restless to return, lest any change should take place in his absence, and truly it seemed that, but for the incessant care and attention, death would have gained the victory.

“ But science conquered ; and from incessant watching, Mr. Ross’s attention was reduced to visits three times, twice, and then only once a day. From the inanimate pale face the dark shadow had been effectually chased, and divers signs of amendment set in, one succeeding the other rapidly, till danger was quite at an end.

“ And now the change had taken place ; for instead of sitting at home hour after hour, neglected, and longing for a patient, the demands upon Mr. Ross’s time grew incessant, till with a pout on her lips, but joy in her heart, Mrs. Ross declared that she could never be sure of her husband from one hour to another.

“ For the fame of the cure had gone forth, with all the exaggerations common to a country place, and wealthy old Tomkins grew at last fat, as he sat at home gnawing his nails with annoyance at seeing his practice become less year by year, till a call grew to be something unusual ; and making a virtue of necessity, he told a

crony, one evening in confidence, that with so many new-fangled ideas in medicine the profession was going to the dogs, and he was glad to say he was not called out now one night in a month ; while as to meeting that upstart, Ross, in consultation, he would not do it to save his life—and he might have added, anybody else's.

“ But John Ross was not proud in his prosperity, and would at any time have stretched out the hand of good fellowship to the old doctor, could he have been sure that it would have been taken.

“ The Ross family found fast friends in the Westerns ; and it was at one of the dinner parties at the Hall, that after seriously speaking to his friends of the debt of obligation he was under to Mr. Ross, and thanking him again as the instrument, under God's providence, of giving them back their child to life, that, to give a livelier tone to the conversation, the squire related an anecdote he professed to have heard a few days before, in an encounter which took place between the sexton of the old church, and the old gentleman doing duty at the new.

“ ‘ Ah ! ’ said the first old man, chuckling with triumph, ‘ you don't have half so many funerals in your yard as I do in mine.’

“ ‘ No,’ said the other, ‘ and somehow they seem to be falling off year by year. My place isn't hardly worth holding now. The town gets a deal too healthy.’

“ ‘ It does so,’ said the first speaker. ‘ I'm nearly ruined, and can't make it out anyhow—can you ? ’

“ ‘ No,’ said the other, ‘ it's past me’—‘ and then the two old fellows went chattering and grumbling off,’

continued Mr. Western ; ' and if any one wishes to know the reason of the falling away, he must ask our friend the doctor there ; though he will be sure to deny that he has had anything to do with it.'

" ' There's the bell again, dear,' said Mrs. Ross one day, ' and if it wasn't for knowing that you are wanted for some poor suffering creature, I believe I should exclaim against it as being a perfect nuisance. You never now seem to get a meal in peace.'

" ' Oh ! yes, I do,' said Mr. Ross smiling. ' The bell does its share of work, though, certainly. By the way though, my dear, you never feel any dread in having the bell answered now, do you ?'

" ' Dread ? no ; what a question ! ' said Mrs. Ross. ' What made you say that ? '

" ' I was only thinking of a few years ago, when a ring at the bell sometimes caused one's heart to beat, lest it should be some hungry creditor.'

" Mrs. Ross sighed, and then smiled, saying, ' and all the rest has come of patience.'

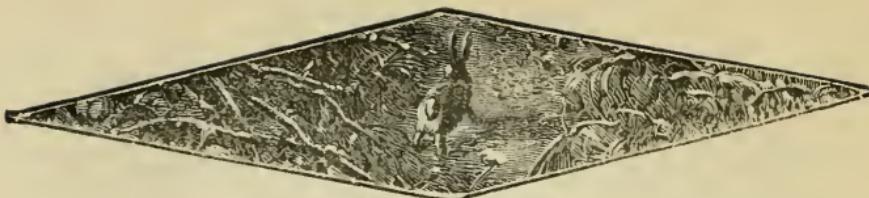
" ' And work,' said her husband.

" ' But I don't think,' she whispered, creeping closer to his side, and drawing one strong arm around her as if for protection—' I don't think, dear, you will ever again say that the rich have no trouble.'

" John Ross was silent for awhile, as he recalled the loss he had so nearly sustained, and the scene at the Hall, when the hope of two fond parents lay a-dying, and then he answered softly—

" ' God forbid ! ' "





CHAPTER XIV.

PENGELLY'S WEAKNESS.



THESE were the people the Hendricks wished me to go and visit, and in due course I went down to Elmouth to pass two of the most delicious months of rest and peace, growing stronger day by day, and finding ample food for thought in what I saw and heard.

I had left London with a feeling that one great interest of my life would be for the time in abeyance, but I soon found upon mixing with the simple-hearted fishing and mining folks, that though the locality was changed, the pleasures and pains of people were just the same, and that care and suffering came to Cornwall hand-in-hand as often as elsewhere.

One of my great friends here was Old Pengelly, the Ross's gardener, and often in a dreamy pleasant day have I sat in the old rugged garden, made in a niche of the great granite rocks with a view of the restless changing sea.

Old Pengelly always had an idea that I was too weak to walk, and showed me the tenderest solicitude

as he moved my chair more into the shade, fetched my sunshade or book ; but his great delight was to kneel down and weed some bed close by me, and talk about the past, and no sooner did he find that he had hit upon some subject that seemed to interest me, than he would go steadily on, only rising up and straightening himself now and then, to get rid of a pain in his back.

“ Ah-h-h ! ” he would say, “ don’t take no notice of my groaning ma’am, that’s my back that is, and all along of mowing, and digging, and sweating, and lifting about them lumps of granite stone to make the missus’s rockeries ; master don’t seem to do it a bit of good.”

“ Doesn’t he, Pengelly ? ” I said, as I could not help smiling as I thought of the fine sturdy old man’s age, for he was seventy-five.

“ No, ma’am ; you see it’s rheumatiz just in the small, through the rain on it sometimes, and the sun on it sometimes, and the prespiration on it always, along o’ that bit o’ lawn swade. Nice bit o’ green swade, though, as any in the county—spongy, and springy, and clean. Deal o’ worrit though, to get it to rights, what with the worms a-throwing up their casties, and them old starlings pegging it about and tearing it to rags, and then the daisies coming up all over it in all directions. There ain’t nothing like daisies : cut their heads off, and they like it ; spud ’em up, and fresh tops come ; stop ’em in one place, and they comes up in another. I can’t get riddy of ’em. That bit o’ lawn would be perfect if it wasn’t for the daisies ; but they will come up, and like everything else in this life, that there lawn ain’t perfect. They will come, you know : they will live, and you can’t kill ’em. They ain’t like

some things in this life that won't live, do all you can to make 'em.

" There, don't you take no notice of them ; they ain't tears, they ain't ; that isn't crying, that's a sort o' watery weakness in the eyes through always being a gardener all your life, and out in the wet. Only, you know, when I get talking about some things living do all you can to kill 'em—such as weeds, you know, and daisies ; and of some things not living, do all you can to make 'em, like balsams in frosty springs, you know—I think about my boy, as was always such a tender plant, do all I would, and about all the plans I'd made for him, and all cut short by one o' the sharp frosts as the good Master of all sends sometimes in every garden, whether it's such a one as this, with good shelter, and a south aspeck, and plenty of warm walls for your trained trees, or the big garden of life, with the different human trees a-growing in it ; some fair plants growing to maturity, and sending out fine green leaves, well veined and strong, well-shaped blossoms of good colour and sweet smell, fair to look upon, and doing good in this life ; sturdy, well-grown trees of men, and bright-hued, tender, loving plants of women ; some with tendrils and clinging ways—the fruitful vines upon your house—and many clustering blossoms of children ; and bad weeds, and choking thorns, and poison-berries, and all. Life's just one big garden, and when I stick my spade in like this here, and rest my foot on it, and my elber on the handle, and my chin on my hand, I get thinking about it all in a very strange way, oftens and oftens.

" Say I get a bit of ground ready, and put seed in. That's faith, ain't it ? I put those little tiny brown

grains in, and I know in all good time, according as the great God has ordained, those tiny grains will come up, and blow, and seed in their turns. Not all though ; some gets nipped, and never comes to anything, spite of all your care, some slowly shrivels away, and those that do are generally the best.

“ That’s the watery weakness again. Don’t you take no notice of that ; only, you know, whatever I get talking about seems, somehow or other, to work round to my poor boy as we’ve laid in the earth over yonder by the old church—a human seed, sowed in corruption, to be raised in incorruption, eh ? Those are the words, ain’t they, ma’am ? And that’s faith, too, you’ll say.

“ We were quite old folks when we married, you see, not being able to afford it early in life, and when that boy was born, being an odd, old-fashioned gardener of a man, I was always looking upon him as a sort of plant sent to me to bring up to as near perfection as we can get things in a garden that isn’t Eden. And there I used to sit at dinner hours or teas having my pipe, as made the little thing sneeze, but kept away blight, you know : and then I used to plot and plan as to how I’d work him ; how, every now and then, I should, as he grew, carefully loosen all the earth about his tender young fibres, and give him some of the best, well-mixed, rich soil when I repotted him, shaking it well in amongst his roots, giving him room to grow, every now and then, by putting him in a larger pot, watching carefully for blight, taking away all green moss, giving him proper light and air, and all the time while it was nursery gardening, treating him as his tender nature required.

“ Light, rich, loamy soil I meant him to have as

soon as he was fit to go on a border, and then I meant to train him ; ah, that I did ! I'd made up my mind that no one else should touch him, but that I'd train him myself. A weed shouldn't come near him, nor slug, nor snail neither, if I knew it, but I'd cover him over, and shelter him from all frosts, and then watch him grow and grow in the light and warmth of God's beautiful sunshine. And let me tell you that you people who live in your big towns don't know the real pleasure there is in seeing a young plant grow day by day, putting forth its wonderful leaves from out some tiny bud, where they have lain snugly shut up from the winter's frosts, then the beautifully-painted flowers with their sweet scents. There, when I go to bed every night, in my humble fashion I thank God that I was made a gardener, with the chance through life of watching His wondrous works, and how He has ordained that man, by industry and skill, can change the wild, worthless weed or tree into the healthy, life-supporting vegetable or fruit. And yet I don't know but what I'm doing you town-dwellers a wrong, for I've seen many a pale face in your close, crowded courts watching patiently over some sickly, sun-asking flower in a broken pot, watering it, maybe, with a cracked jug, and then I've longed to put that pale face down in such a place as my garden here—I call it mine, you know, though it's master's—to watch it brighten, and see, as I've often seen before now, the tears of joy come into the eyes of that pale face because things were so beautiful.

“ There's nothing like gardens, ma'am, to make people good and pure-hearted, for there's something about flowers that leads the thoughts up and up, higher



"I TOOK HIM IN HIS LITTLE CHAIR TO THE WARMEST SPOT I COULD
FIND"—(see p. 175).

and higher. I pity you folks in London. There's religion in gardens, and I think if you put beautiful flowers within reach of people, you do them more good than by showing them grand buildings and sights. There's a something in flowers that makes its way to the heart—not only in the grandest blossoms, but in the simplest ; and I ain't going to set up for a prophetic person, but I mean to say that as long as this world lasts there will always be a tender love in every human heart for the little, gentle, sweet-scented violets. I've lived in big towns myself, and seen the girls with their baskets full of fresh-gathered blossoms, nestling amongst green leaves, with the water lying upon them in big, bright beads, and when, being only a poor man, I've spent my penny in a bunch of the fragrant little blossoms, and held it to my face, what have I breathed in?—just the scent of a violet? Oh, no ! but God's bright country —far away from the smoke, and bricks, and mortar—and health and strength, and then it would be that a great longing would come on me to be once again where the wind blew free and the sun shone brightly.

“ That was, you know, when I went up to London to better myself, and didn't ; thinking, you know, to get to be gardener to some great man, or in one of the societies, but there wasn't room for me.

“ I've heard about some poet saying something about a man to whom a primrose by the river's brim was a yellow primrose, and nothing more. I wonder what sort of a man that was, who could look upon the simplest flower that grows, and not see in it wonder, majesty, grandeur—a handiwork beside which the greatest piece of machinery made by man seems as it were nothing.

But there, that's always the way with violets and primroses, they always have a tendency towards bringing on that watery weakness. They do it with hundreds, bless you, if given at the right times. They're so mixed up with one's early life, you see, and with days' when everything looked so bright and sunny ; and with some people, I suppose, that is the reason why they act so upon them ; while with me, you see, there's something else, for when I think of them, I can always see two little bunches lying upon a little breast, with never a breath to stir them,—bright blossoms, smelling of the coming spring-time, but soon to be shut from the light of heaven, and buried deep, deep with that seed to be raised where chill winds never come, where the flowers are never-fading, and where the light of love shines ever upon those thought worthy to enter into that garden of life everlasting, amen !

“ For it was all in vain, it was not to be. I made all my plans, I took all the care I could, I meant to train and prune and cut out all fortright and awkward growths, I meant that boy to be something to be proud of ; but it was not to be : he was not to blossom here, —this did not seem to be his climate ; and though I wouldn't see it, there was the plain fact, that there was a canker somewhere out of sight where it could not be got at ; and though I tried, and the doctor tried, all we knew, it was of no use, and at last I was obliged to own that my little fellow was slowly withering away. I used to have him in his little chair in a sheltery spot, where there was sunshine, and give him a bunch of flowers to play with ; but at last he grew too weak to be taken out, so I used to take him some flowers home, and it was always the same, he would hold them in his

hand till they withered away, and then cry to see how they were faded.

“ And at last there came a day when he did not seem any worse than usual. It was one of those soft, bright, warm spring days, that come in all at once, setting the buds bursting, the birds building, and your heart seeming to drink in a kind of joy from the soft breeze. I'd been to dinner, and was going back to the garden, to finish a bit of nailing in over there upon the south wall, that ought to have been done long before. Well, I'd got to the door, when my poor little fellow burst out crying to go with me ; and at last, seeing how bright and warm it was, and how sheltered he would be there, under the sunny wall, we wrapped him up, and I took him in his little chair to the warmest spot I could find, gave him some violets and primroses, and a crocus and snow-drop or two, and then I was soon up on my ladder, nailing away, laying in young wood there, moving a branch here, and, being fond of my work, and soon interested, I was sometimes a quarter of an hour together without looking at our little fellow ; but I was down four times to pick him a fresh flower or two and the last time I was down I thought he seemed a little drowsy.

“ At last I got off to move my ladder, and had my foot on the round to get up again, when I looked at the little chair, and started to see that my boy was lying fast asleep, when, for fear of cold, I caught him up, and carried him towards our cottage ; but I had not gone half-way, before a strange shudder seemed to run through me, and I stopped short to look in the little face, saying something that I knew would make him smile if he heard it ; and then, hardly knowing

what I did, I rushed home with my light burden, whose little hands were tightly holding some of God's early gifts of spring against the little breast now growing colder and colder.

"No, he didn't hear me ; but there was just the faint dawning of a smile about his little mouth : for God is very kind to some of those he loves, and there was no sign of pain there as he went to sleep. And I can't think that I'm wrong, in always fancying my boy where never-fading flowers bloom, for he was too young to have ever angered his Maker ; and besides, did he not say, 'Suffer little children to come unto me,' and 'Of such is the kingdom of heaven ?'

"Don't you take no notice of me, that's a watery weakness ; but, now, just look there, I went over every bit of that lawn reg'lar, last week, and then there wasn't a bit of daisy to be seen ; while now, here they are coming up in a bunch. But it really is the case with flowers, that those you want to kill and get rid of won't die, while those you wish to save—— There, don't take no notice of me, it's only a watery weakness."

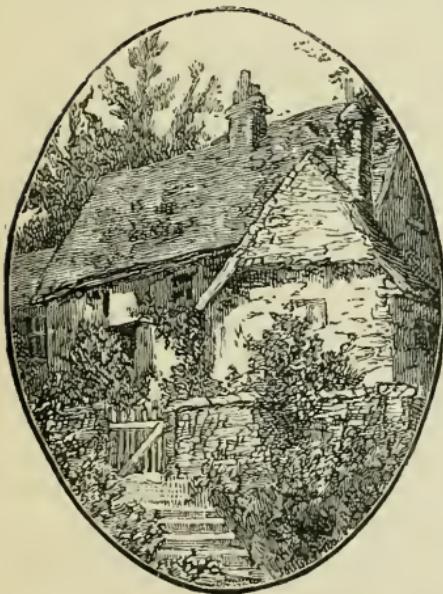
Poor old Pengelly went away, for the weakness seemed disposed to increase, and for long enough he was busy weeding a nook of the garden far away from where I sat. He was very reticent afterwards, for days to come, and when at last he grew more sociable his face was hard, rugged and weather stained, and he seemed the last man to have been influenced by a tender sympathetical thought.





CHAPTER XV.

SALT TEARS.



THAT rugged exterior and tenderness of heart of the Cornish people render them marked amongst their fellows. It is questionable whether you would find in any part of England so respectable and religious a body of men as those of Cornwall. Whether fishers or miners it is the same, they are quiet, temperate, and God fearing,

and certainly more intelligent than the men of many counties. I have often sat in the Ross's garden of an evening listening to the singing of the fishermen upon the cliff, not the roaring of some sailors' chorus, but the sweetly blended parts of some old hymn, or glee—for part singing lingers still amongst these Western folks.

Then as to education, I have been surprised at their amount of knowledge and reading. One fair ruddy

sturdy old fellow, the corners of whose lips were not free from the stains of tobacco, used to take me out occasionally in his boat and showed me the various rocks and caves, and he surprised me by his reading. The first time I was out with him I found that his boat was called *The Chemorne*, and I naturally enough asked why he had given it so quaint a name.

“Oh, it means *Birch Canoe*,” he said, and when I asked further, he told me that he had found the name in *Hiawatha*, when he was reading Longfellow’s poems.

One of my greatest intimates though amongst the fishermen, was a quiet stern-faced middle-aged man, who seemed to have some great trouble upon his mind; and one evening when he had rowed me out beyond the headland, and lay upon his oars, he began talking to me about the sorrow of his life, the death of the woman he had loved and who was to have been his wife.

“Yes,” he said, “I behaved bad to her ma’am, and all through blind obstinacy and want of faith.

“I’ve seen that same face of hers scores of times since, and though it makes me shudder, and nips me to the heart, I always go and have a good long earnest look at it, and come away a better man. You may see that face yourself—as much like as if it had been taken from her sad, anxious looks—you may see it at the picture-shop windows, and it’s of a woman tying a handkerchief round a man’s arm, and she looks up at him pitifully, and it’s called ‘The Huguenot.’ That’s like the look, and the face that gazed up into mine after she’d told me what I know now was the truth; and I—yet I’m most ashamed to own it—I flung her away

from me, and wouldn't believe what she said. There was a tear upon each cheek, and the bright drops were brimming in her eyes, and ready to fall ; but I was hard and bitter, and whispered to myself that they were false tears, put on to cheat me, and I ran out of her father's house, swearing that I'd enter it again no more.

“ Speaking as a fisherman, and one who was brought up with the sound of the sea always in his ears, I may say we rowed well together in the same boat, Mary and I. I had a long fight of it before I could persuade her that it would be best for her future that she should take me for pilot, and not Harry Penellyn ; but I did persuade her at last, and we were to be married down at the little fishermen's church at the head of the cove. So we worked and waited.

“ Two years of as happy a life then fell to my lot as could fall to that of any man in this life, I believe. My ways were rough, and hers were not those of a lady, but they suited our stations in life, and what more would you have ? I look back upon that bright bit of life as if it was some dream ; and though I can't settle to go back to the old place, I cling to the fish, and look upon those days when a Lozarde boat comes in, as days worth recollecting ; for they bring the blood in one's cheek, and a bit of light into one's eye.

“ I can see it all now as plain as can be : the little fishing village under the cliff ; the stout granite pier running out so as to form a harbour for the fishing-boats ; and the blue sea, stretching away far as eye could reach. Down by its edge, too, the weed-fringed rocks, piled high in places, with the sea foaming amongst the crevices, and again forming little rock-

pools where the bright sea growths flourished ; and as the tide came in, with its fresh cooling waters, you saw the limpets and sea flowers wakening again to life, while many a spider-crab and shell-fish crept out of the nook or crack where it had hidden from the warm sun. I can see it all now at any time, though I am growing grey, and nigh a score of years have passed since ; but brighter than all seem to stand out those two mournful eyes, with the same tearful look they gave me as I flung out of the door and saw them for the last time ; for when next I looked upon that face the eyes were fast closed, and could I have opened them the lustre would have been gone.

“ A west country fisherman’s life is one which takes him a deal from home, for sometimes we go off for perhaps three months at a time to the north coast, or to Ireland when the herring season is on ; and, like the rest, I used to be off in my boat, sorry enough to leave home—happy enough to return after a busy season, till one year, when I took it into my head to think it strange that Harry Penellyn, Mary’s old beau, should spin his illness out so long and stop ashore, time after time, when the boats went out, and him seeming to be well and strong as any of us. There had been a heavy gale on the coast some weeks before, and, as we always do at such times, we had run in for the harbour as soon as we saw it coming ; but, through bad seamanship, Penellyn’s boat came inside the rocks, when she should have come outside, and then, through their not having water enough, she grounded, lifted again, caught by the stern, and then swung round broadside to the waves, which swept her half deck, while a regular chorus of shrieks rose from the women standing ashore.

“ It was a rough time, for even our boats that were in the harbour were groaning and grinding together, while every now and then the sea washed over so as to threaten to fill them, and sweeping the pier from end to end. In an ordinary way we made a custom of laughing at the crew of a boat who, from bungling, got her on the rocks, for born as we were in the bay, with our fathers fishers before us, we knew every stone along the coast, and could almost have steered our boat to them blindfold ; but this was no time to jeer, for now the poor fellows were being swept one by one from their hold, and borne struggling through the surf to the rocks, where they were in danger of being dashed to pieces, for ours was no smooth, sandy beach. Some were swimming, some beating the water frantically ; and clad as our men are, in their thick cloth trousers, heavy sea boots, and stout Guernsey shirts, they stand a poor chance of keeping long afloat, for the weight of their boots is enough to drag them down.

“ There was every one in a state of excitement ; some running out as far as they could and throwing ropes—men shouting orders that nobody attended to—women tossing their arms up and crying, while first one and then another of the boat’s crew was dragged ashore, and carried half drowned up to the cottages.

“ I was standing looking on, with Mary by my side, for she was out on the cliff when my boat ran into the little harbour, while her hand was the first to clasp mine when I got ashore, thankful for the escape we had had, for the sea had risen wonderfully quick. I had taken no part in trying to save the boat’s crew, for there were plenty of willing hands, and there being but little standing-room down below the cliff, I had

thought I should be in the way; but now it seemed to me that one poor fellow would be lost with the efforts they were making to save him, for he was too weak to cling to the ropes thrown out, and as fast as he was swept in by the waves, they sucked him back.

“ I had not seen who it was, but just then, as I made a start as if to go down, Mary clutched my arm, and there was a wild look in her face as she said aloud, ‘ Harry Penellyn.’

“ The excitement of the moment carried almost everything before it, but I had a strange feeling shoot through my heart, and something seemed to say, ‘ Keep back;’ but the next minute I was fighting with the waves, with the noose of a rope round my body, and plenty of stout mates ashore fast hold of the end. Then, after a strangling battle, I got tight hold of Penellyn, and we were drawn ashore, and both of us carried up to Mary’s father’s cottage, though I tried hard to get upon my feet and walk, but I might have known that our fellows would not have let me on any account.

“ Well, Harry Penellyn lay there three or four days, and Mary tended him, and all that time I had to fight against a strange, ungenerous, cowardly feeling that would creep over me, and seemed at times to make me mad, till I got myself in a corner and asked myself questions, to all of which I could only answer the same word—nothing. Then Penellyn got better, and went to his mother’s house; and time went on, till I grew bitter, and harsh, and morose, and was always haunted by a suspicion that I would not put into words, while now the question came again and again—‘ Why doesn’t Harry Penellyn go to sea?’

“ But no answer came to my question ; and though he seemed to be well and strong as ever, he always kept at home while we went out ; and in my then state of mind this troubled me, and I kept feeling glad that we were only out now on the short trips of a few days in length. I grew angry with myself and with all around. Ay, and I grow angry even now, when I think that a few earnest words of explanation—a few questions that I know would have been answered freely—would have set all right, and perhaps saved the life of as good and loving a woman as ever lived in the light.

“ But it was not to be so ; and I went on wilfully blinding my eyes to everything—placing a wrong construction upon every look and word, and making those true eyes gaze at me again and again in wonder ; whilst Harry Penellyn, who had never before shown me much goodwill, now that I had saved his life, would have been friends, only I met his every advance with a black scowl, when he always turned off and avoided me.

“ One evening it had come to the lot of my boat to run into harbour with the fish of several other boats ; for the takes had been very light, and somehow or another I felt more bright and happy than I had done for weeks. I got ashore, left my mates tending the mackerel, and ran up to Old Carne’s cottage to find Mary out.

“ This did not trouble me at first ; but after a few minutes’ fidgeting about, I felt a flush come in my face, and hurrying out, I made an excuse at Mrs. Penellyn’s, and got to know that Harry was out too.

“ The hot blood rose from my cheeks to my forehead, and seemed to blind me ; then a strange singing sensation came in my ears ; but the next minute I was

tearing along the cove in the dark of the evening, so as to get away where I might be alone with my thoughts, for that vile suspicion that was struggling with me before, had now conquered and beaten me down, so that I was its slave, and for the time a regular madman.

“I had run about half a mile, when I stopped panting, and began to walk slowly along beneath the trees close beside the fern-hung rocky bank, while it was now too dark to see far before me. But the next instant I was standing with my breath held, and one hand resting on my side, for as I crouched close to the bank I heard Penellyn’s voice, talking earnestly as he passed a few yards from me, with his arm tightly clasping a woman’s waist, and just as they had passed they stopped, and there was light enough for me to see him bend over her, and without stopping to think, I leaped from where I was hid, and, as the woman shrieked and fled, I had Penellyn by the throat, and we joined in a fierce struggle.

“If an angel had told me I was deceived, I should not have believed him then in my blind fury; and it was not until, having dashed his head against the ground again and again, and felt my enemy’s hold relax, that I leaped up, kicked him savagely, and then ran back.

“Just as I expected, Mary was at home, looking hot and flushed, but she jumped up with a smile, and hurried to me, saying—

“‘I was down at Mrs. Trevere’s, dear; but I heard your boat had come, and—’

“She stopped short, half frightened by my wild looks and disordered clothes, and half by the savage curse I gnashed out at her as I seized her arms; while, as the

place, what electro or veneer is to the precious metal or solid wood. There were plate-glass windows, but the frames had warped ; handsome balustrades to green shrunken stairs ; the floor-boards had shrunk one from another and curled up ; the ceilings had cracked ; and where the rain had found its way in, through defective spouts at the side, or bad slating and plumbing of the roof, the walls told tales, in the unpleasant-smelling efflorescence of microscopic fungi, that, in place of good honest sand-mixed mortar, the house had been built, by a scamping contractor, with rubbish ground up with a dash of lime stuff, that is good for two or three years, and then crumbles away.

From room to room of the desolate place we went, to find every window closely shut. There was the pleasant prospect, beyond the tiny square of grass-grown earth called a garden, of the blank end wall of the row of houses in the next street. Over the wall, next door, an attempt had been made to brighten the prospect ; but the plants looked melancholy, and a Virginia creeper that ought to have been displaying its gorgeous autumnal tints was evidently suffering from a severe bilious attack, due to low spirits, bad drainage, and a clay soil. The very sparrows on the ledges were moulted, and appeared depressed ; and on going higher up, there was a blank hideous cistern in one of the attics, that looked so much like a sarcophagus on a humid principle, and suggested such horrors of some day finding a suicidal servant-maid within, that any lingering ideas of recommending the house vanished like dirty snow-crystals before a pelting rain.

“It’s a very convenient house,” said the old gentleman.

“ And will let some day at a far higher rent,” piped the old lady.

“ You’d better come down to the breakfast-room now,” said the old gentleman.

“ And see the kitchen too,” echoed the old lady.

So I went down—to find, as I expected, the breakfast-room showing a cloudy mountainous line of damp on the paper for about two feet above the wainscot ; and here again the window was closely shut, and the strange mephitic odour of damp and exhausted air stronger than ever.

This apartment was the one utilised by the old couple for bed and sitting-room combined, and their spare furniture was spread neatly over it, according to the homely old rule of “ making the most of things.”

I finished my inspection, with the old folks most eager in their praise of all, and when I pointed to the damp the old gentleman exclaimed—

“ Oh ! you’ll find that in all the houses about here. It rises up the wall, you see.”

“ Yes, from bad building,” I answered.

“ But it’s much worse at the house opposite,” said the old lady.

“ Where the tenant died ? ” I said.

“ Yes,” she answered innocently enough.

“ Why, you seem anxious to let the house,” I said smiling.

“ Well, yes,” said the old gentleman, combing his few hairs with one end of his spectacles. “ You see, the agents like us to let the houses ; and if we’re in one very long——”

“ He don’t like it,” said the old lady.

“ Then you often have to change ? ”

"It all depends; sometimes we've been in houses where they've been let in a week."

"Not in new neighbourhoods," said the old lady; "people's shy of coming to the very new places. You see they're only just run up, and the roads ain't made."

"Ah!" said the old gentleman, "sometimes the roads ain't made till the houses are all let."

"And people often won't take the houses till the roads are made," said the old lady.

"So sometimes we're a year or two in a place. People are so particular about damp, you see," said the old gentleman.

"And many of the houses are damp?" I asked inquiringly.

"Well, ma'am, what can you expect," he replied confidentially, "seeing how things goes? Here's, say, a field here to-day, and the surveyor marks it out into roads. Then one speculative builder runs up a lot of carcases on it, and fails. Then another buys the carcases, and finishes 'em in a showy, flashy way; and then they put them at very low rents, to tempt people to take 'em."

"And raises the rents as soon as one or two tenants have been in them," said the old lady.

"It tempts people like," continued the old gentleman; "they see nice showy-looking houses in an open place, and they think they're healthy."

"And they're not?" I said.

The old man shrugged his shoulders.

"Healthy? No!" cried the old lady. "How can they be healthy, with the mortar and bricks all wet, and the rain perhaps been streaming into them for months before they were finished? Why, if you go and look in

some of those big half-finished houses, just two streets off, you see the water lying in the kitchens and breakfast-rooms a foot deep. That's how he got his rheumatics." Here she nodded at her husband,

"Don't bother the lady about that, Mary," said the old man, mildly.

"You've lived in some of these very new damp places, then?"

"Well," said the old gentleman smiling, "beggars mustn't be choosers, you see. We have to take the house the agent has on hand."

"You take charge of a house, then, on condition of living rent-free?"

"Yes, ma'am, that's it," said the old lady smiling.

"And how long have you lived in this way?"

"Oh! close upon fifteen years, ma'am," replied the old gentleman; "but things are not so good as they were. More than once I've nearly had to take a place —much building as there is going on."

"Yes, and pay rent," said the old lady.

"You see it's the police," the old gentleman went on.

"The police?"

"Yes, the police," said the old lady. "The boys do so much mischief."

"Boys, you see, from the thick parts of London," said the old gentleman explaining. "Rough lads on Sundays. They get amongst the empty and unfinished houses, troops of them, to play pitch-and-toss, and they throw stones and break windows and slates."

"And knock down the plaster and bricks," added the old lady.

"Ah! they most levelled one wall close by," said the old gentleman.

“They’re so fond of making seesaws of the wood, too,” said the old lady.

“And splashing about in the pools of water,” said the old gentleman.

“And the agents, on account of this, have took to having the police,” said the old lady.

“To keep the boys away?” I asked.

“Yes; you see, it’s the married police and their wives take charge of the houses, and when the boys know that there’s policemen about, why, of course they stay away.”

“But it makes it very bad for such as we,” said the old lady.

“Fifteen years is a long time to live rent-free,” I said smiling.

“Yes, ma’am, it is, and you see we have a deal to do for it. We have lots of people come to look at the houses before one’s let.”

“Specially women,” chimed in the old gentleman. “There’s some come regular, and do it, I s’pose, because they likes it. They look at all the houses in the neighbourhood, same as some other ladies always go to sales. They never buy anything; and *they* never mean to take a house; but they come and look at ‘em, all the same.”

“But we always know them,” said the old lady.

“Yes, they’re easy enough to tell,” chuckled the old man. And then, seeing me look inquiringly at him, he went on, “They finds fault with everything, ma’am. The hall’s too narrow, or else too broad, and the staircase isn’t the right shape. Then they want folding doors to the dining-room; or they don’t want folding doors. Sometimes six bed-rooms is too many; some-

times eight ain't enough. And they always finds fault with the kitchen."

"And they always want a fresh paper in the dining-room," said the old lady chiming in; "and the drawing-room paper's too light; and we don't mind them a bit."

"No," chuckled the old gentleman; "we're used to them. We know, bless you!"

"And I suppose you felt that I did not want a house, eh?"

"No, that we didn't," said the old lady; "you see, you came with an order from the agent; while people as don't want houses never takes the trouble to get that, but drops in promiskus where they see the bills up."

"One gets to understand people in fifteen years," said the old gentleman, in a quiet subdued way; "and we don't mind. We say all we can for a house, as in dooty bound, for the agent; but it goes against one, same time."

"You could not conscientiously recommend this house, then, for a family?" I asked.

The old gentleman tightened his lips, and looked at his wife; and the old lady tightened hers, and looked at her husband; but neither spoke.

"I see," I said; then, turning the conversation, "you have been at this for years?"

"Fifteen ma'am," said the old lady. "You see, when our poor——"

"Don't trouble the lady about that," said the old man, with appeal in his voice; but the old lady liked to talk, and went on—

"When our poor Mary died—aged nineteen, ma'am,

and as beautiful a girl as ever you saw, and used to help us in the business, keeping the books and writing letters—all seemed to go wrong, and at last we sold out for the best we could make of it, and that just paid our debts——”

“ All but Tompkins’ bill,” said the old man correcting.

“ Yes, all but Tompkins’ bill,” said the old lady; “ but that we paid afterwards. We should have had to go to the parish, only an aunt of mine died and left us a bit of property that brings us in ten shillings a week; which is enough for us so long as we don’t pay rent and taxes.”

“ That’s how we came to be here,” said the old gentleman, smiling sadly at his wife, “ and we’ve seen some strange changes since; living in houses where people died of fevers; in old houses; in new houses that ought to be knocked down by Act of Parliament, they’re so bad; in houses where the people’s been extravagant, and gone to ruin. But there, it does for us while we’re here.”

He looked at his wife on this, and the old lady placed her thin veiny hand on his arm, telling, by that one action, of trust, love, and faith in her old companion over a very stony path; and I left them together trying very hard to close the front door, the old man’s last words being—

“ It sticks so, on account of the wood warping, and that great crack”—the said crack being one from the first to the second floor.





CHAPTER XVIII.

MY FRIEND IN HOSPITAL.



I WAS more successful during the next few days, and had a list of four houses for Mr. Ross to see, one of which he selected for his brother.

For my part I was very busy, having many people to see, and being on one occasion in Hammersmith, where the omnibus driver had told me he lived, I made a point of finding his house

in a very humble street, and after rather a distant reception from his wife, the poor creature opened her heart to me, and told me that she was in trouble : her husband had had an accident, been kicked by one of his horses, and was in the hospital very ill.

I said what I could by way of comforting the poor thing, and on leaving said that I would go and see him, when the woman's face flushed with joy.

“ You will, ma'am,” she cried.

“ To be sure I will,” I said quietly, and I left her seeming the happier for my few words of sympathy and hope.

The next day I was on my way up Gower Street, the long dull, and dreary, where the cabs roll echoing along, and in the silent night the echoes sound like the rumbling in some huge water-pipe. Up Gower Street, where the dismal grinding of the organ sharpens every nerve, and sends the horrors throbbing through every vein and artery—music no longer, but a loud, long wail, sobbing in the windows, and beating for entrance at the doors ; up Gower Street, where the dwellers grow hardened to sad sights—where they know the brougham of the great physician or surgeon—the cab conveying the out-patient, or that which bears the in-patient to his couch of suffering ; where the face of the pale student who has not yet ceased to shudder at the sufferings of his fellow-man is as familiar as that of the reckless or studious one to whom a groan or heart-wrung agonized cry is part of the profession ; where weeping relations—poor, common people, who have left their dear ones in the great hall, or perhaps been to spend an hour by their bedsides—are but everyday sights such as may be seen near each great hospital.

Up Gower Street there's a crowd, which in London is but another word for a magnet which draws to itself the sharp needles of the streets ; ay, the blunt and broken ones, too—everything steely clings to it, while the softer material falls away.

Only a woman crying ! Not much that. We may see that every day in our streets, and in most cases turn shuddering away, thinking of the dear ones at home—wife and daughters—sisters or betrothed, and saying to ourselves, “ Can this be a woman ! ” But here we can stand with pitying feelings welling up from

our hearts. Only a woman crying! but with such tears gushing from her eyes as Rachel shed when mourning for her children, and refusing to be comforted because they were not. A poor, untutored, unlettered woman, who has not learned the art of controlling her feelings. She has just come out of the great, gaunt, cheerless building; staggered along for some distance, blinded with tears; and at last, oblivious of all but her own bitterness, sunk down upon a doorstep sobbing wildly, for she has been to see the stalwart son who was to have been the prop and stay of her old age, and they have shown her a gaunt, pale, wild-eyed figure that knew her not; and she has come away broken-hearted, and, unlike Joseph of old, too forgetful of self to seek a place where she might weep.

Rocking herself to and fro, and moaning bitterly, till a friendly arm is offered, and she is led away, the crowd parting to let her pass, with many a rough, sympathizing word uttered; and then with her burden of sorrow she slowly totters along the gloomy street, followed by a straggling crew of children, ragged boys, girls top-heavy with babies tied up in shawls, and wonderful above all other things for their vitality. To see them day by day, and the risks they run, the only wonder is that their babyhood does not form their shroud, and cover them effectually from further advance towards adolescence.

And now a cab drawn at a foot's pace towards the great door of the hospital—to so many the jaws of death. A little crowd here even, to see the patient carried in by the two stout porters. A little crowd here, when it might be a case of fever or something else—*infectious, contagious*. But no; this is no fever

case, but one for our skilled surgeons; for the poor lad is bleeding, bound up, and fainting. Injured by machinery. His finger was caught by the cogs of a machine—the hand, the arm drawn in, and crushed right up to above the elbow, so that, what with loss of blood and the shock to the system, it will be a clever surgeon that can save his life.

But he will have the best of skill here, and every appliance that surgery can devise to allay his sufferings—everything but the tender hands of those he loves; while it will take all his hopefulness to fight against the sorrowful thoughts of his maimed and helpless future. He, a poor wounded one of the great army fighting for life—battling day by day with poverty, from childhood to old age; and he early stricken down in the contest.

And now another carriage stops the way; and the porters are not wanted, for the occupant steps out, evidently with his wife, upon whose arm he leans slightly as they go up the steps. To a casual observer there does not seem much the matter, for he smiles as he speaks cheerily to his companion; but somehow his lip seems to be quivering, and he stops at the last step to give one look round, and not at the dull brick and mortary street, but upwards at the bright sky flecked with fleecy clouds, and there is an agony of longing in that look, which tells of the panting of the soul for health, and of a shadow hovering above him which seems to hide the future from his hopeful gaze. As he still looks up, loth to enter, his glance seems to have within it something of that we see upon the emigrant's face when on shipboard with the anchor a-peak, and the sails shaking out—it seems to say “Farewell.”

But he has returned to the present, and with his lips quivering, he enters the great portal, and the door swings to behind him ; while who can say how he will quit the place—alive and hopeful, past the great danger, and with some wondrous operation performed by skilful hands ; or merely the lifeless clay, with the spirit returned to its Maker ?

An out-door patient creeping up by the aid of a stick —one who cannot summon the fortitude to quit his home, though he would be better in the hospital—better in body perhaps, but worse in spirit ; for he would be homesick, and suffering in mind for the homely comforts and the familiar, ministering hands.

And now another pallid, quivering object, leaning upon the arm of friend or relative. He can hardly walk, and must be suffering from some severe internal disease ; but he has been by three times, and though his hand grasps the order for admission, he dares not enter, but muttering “ Not yet, not yet,” draws his companion away, and totters on until he is fain to rest upon a step. But who can wonder that he should flinch and shrink back when the dread moment arrives ? How many who enter the hospital feel that for them there is written above the portal, “ Who enter here leave hope behind ? ” The great gloomy building has by them been considered as a forlorn hope to try when every other means has failed ; and with shattered nerves, and mind and body worn by disease, they may well shudder and turn from the building, when the robust in health could hardly enter such an abode, of pain and sorrow without a clutching at the heart. And then, too, who is he that seeks a home within the English Maison Dieu but the poor man, perhaps the

bread winner of a large family? and he enters, perhaps, with the knowledge that while he is battling with disease those at home are fighting against the wolf poverty, who has lain down at their door.

But the poor fellow has nerved himself at last, and slowly crawls up the steps, takes one glance round as his fellow-sufferer did some quarter of an hour ago, and the portal has closed upon him.

Next comes the rattling of wheels, and a cab turns the corner at as near an approach to a gallop as the shambling horse can manage. Emergency here; and as the cab dashes up, a man springs off the box, and runs up the steps; and then come the porters with their chair to lift out of the vehicle, a groaning mass of charred humanity, wrapped in a blanket, and whose cries on being touched thrill through one's very marrow, till the door swings to once more.

Again a cab driven up, with this time a policeman on the box, to jump down and fetch out those iron-nerved men whose aid is so frequently sought.

No brand from the burning this time; but another one fallen in the fight with poverty—another wounded—no! hush! they say he is slain, and hesitate before lifting the nerveless, flaccid, collapsing form into the chair.

But he is carried in, and I follow to know the truth and learn it in a few minutes; for the poor fellow, a painter, has fallen from an upper window, with a fearful crash, upon the cruel spikes of the area railings, from which, the newspapers tell us next day, with hideous perspicuity, “he was lifted with great difficulty the spikes having entered his body.”

Guy's, St. Thomas's, St. Bartholomew's, St. George's,

Middlesex, King's College, University, round all of their doors such dread horrors still abound, and to an extent that almost staggers belief. Sorrow, pain, poverty, despair, all seem to join hands and revel around the suffering wretches ; but even to these dismal shadows—these clouds of life—there are silver linings. Hope is there ; faith is there ; mercy is there ; and pity mourns over the suffering poor. It is the collecting together of scenes of misery—the gazing upon so many sufferers at once ; and for the moment we forget that suffering is inevitable—that more or less mental or bodily, it must fall to each one's share ; and as we turn shuddering away, we forget that these great institutions are an honour to our country, and glance but at one side of the question. We forget the quiet, gentlemanly men of iron nerve and determination—the heroes who might wear the palms borne by our warriors—the men who engage face to face with disease, and pluck full many a victim from the grim dragon's jaws. We think not of these calm unassuming men walking quietly into houses plague-stricken, and shunned by all but the mercenary nurse ; we forget that such a thing is unknown as a doctor shrinking from facing the worst fever, and leaving the sufferer unaided. Well, there are honours more to be desired than empty titles ; and in the love, respect and reverence of their fellow men our doctors must revel, for ours is a strange country. We are not given to showy uniforms, and crosses and ribbons. Perhaps it is as well ; for the uniforms and decorations tarnish and fade, while the name once honoured grows brighter with the lapse of years.

The figures seem startling—nay, they are staggering to the belief ; but doubtless the statistician had good

grounds for declaring that more fall by accidents in the streets of London than suffer upon the whole of the railways in our kingdom. Truly, there is good cause for the boards of much abused directors to smile and rub their hands upon hearing such a statement, for it must be gratifying to their sense of self esteem. But leaving out those who suffer in private, what incredible scenes are witnessed by those who make a tour of a hospital ! In adition to the street accidents, what else have we to show of the ills to which mortal flesh is heir ? Burnings and scaldings, domestic and from manufactories ; falls, including sprains, bruises, dislocations, and simple and compound fractures ; cuts, so fearful that one turns away shuddering, and wondering that life has not escaped through the awful gash ; limbs crushed, torn or shattered by machinery ; wounds from blows, enough to fill any hospital with horrors, without stopping to consider that cruel, insidious enemy disease, mining and burrowing its way through the human system, and battling step by step with the science brought to bear upon it. And in what forms does it present itself ? Many common enough, and whose names are sad household words among us, while others are of so complicated a nature that one turns away from the pale, suffering, distorted face with a shudder.

Saddening, most saddening is that aspect of a hospital ward, and the most moving sight is that anxious face of the trembling, suffering patient, before in his extreme horror Nature is merciful to him and draws the veil of insensibility before his starting eyes. " What is it to be ? " seems written upon every line of his haggard countenance. Life, to complete some darling scheme—life, to which we all so tenaciously

cling; or the cold silent grave? Who will tell him, nurse or doctor? And even then does he not look them through and through doubtingly? If they whisper to him of life, he dares hardly believe it, fancying that 'tis but to rouse his flagging energies; while if they refuse to answer his anxiously reiterated questions does he not feel that they give him up, and set it down to ignorance—for he will not die.

I walk between the rows of beds, some empty, some occupied; and then how the frailty of our hold upon life is forced upon me—how insecure seems the tenure! And then more and more how it comes home to the feelings what a trivial matter is our own poor life to the great world at large; how little we should be missed, and how little the busy frequenters of our street think of the sufferers within these bleak, blank walls.

My companion stops with me at last by the bed where lies my friend of the crape butterfly, and as he lies there, very pale but evidently clean and comfortable, his face lights up with pleasure, and he holds out his hand in welcome to me as I take the chair by his side.

“What?” he said; “you never came o’ purpose to see me, ma’am?”

“I assure him that I have, and the poor fellow is so taken aback by this simple little act of kindness that all he can say is, “I’m blessed!” and that he keeps on repeating.

By degrees, though, we are in full conversation, and I have told him about seeing his wife and given her message of love, and then he has told me with the greatest exactness all about the way in which that near-side horse let out at him with his off hoof, and caught

him in the leg. There are no bones broken, but it has been very painful, and how that he should have been at St. George's or Charing Cross Hospital only a doctor who lived at Richmond and often rode up and down on his omnibus wanted him to come into his hospital, University College.

“And precious kind he’s been to me, that he has. Why, if I’d been his own brother he couldn’t have done for me better.”

And so he chatted on about himself, his wife and children, and lastly, as he found a willing listener, about horses, the one that kicked him, and horses in general.

“I don’t think as the poor creetur did it out of spite again me ma’am,” he said, “for I’m always pretty gentle with horses, for I likes ’em. He let out at me because, perhaps, a fly touched him or out of fidgetiness or something ; but anyhow I got it.

“You’d hardly think it, lying wrapped up warm here, but being weak I s’pose has brought out my rheumatics horrid.

“Wonderful trying thing to a man’s constitution is ’bus driving ; particular when them cold winds and biting rains are on. Then’s the time one suffers from the rheumatics. Don’t know what they are, I s’pose ? Good job for you, ma’am. Take my advice, and keep them at a distance, for they’re a sort of poor relation as will stick to you ; and so sure as you fancy you’ve got rid of them, back they comes first rainy day as there is. Rainy day, you knows, just the time as poor relations comes down on you ; though, p’raps, you ain’t got any poor relations. Some people ain’t—leastwise, none as they knows. Well, first rainy day you’re a bit out o’

sorts they comes back again, the rheumatics does, and you know it, and no mistake.

"I got 'em through getting wet, and being obliged to sit on the box all day. A raw nip of brandy would have kept 'em off p'raps, but raw nips of brandy tell upon a man, and I promised Sairey I wouldn't have so many, for she's werry particular about my personal appearance, and she said as the brandy got in the end of my nose and stopped there; so I sat it out that day without a raw nip, though I was having nips enough anyhow.

"That night I could hardly get off my box; next day I was a bit better, but next night I had to be helped down; and though I fought it out, day after day, knowing as giving up meant stopping the bread and cheese, it got to be so that there was no bearing it, and I couldn't sit, nor stand, nor sleep without having some drops out of a bottle of stuff as the old woman bought at the chemist's. Why, it was like toothache beginning in your hip and running right down in your boot, only twice as bad.

"'Have the doctor,' says the missus, after I'd been at home two days.

"'I won't,' I says; 'what's the good of doctors?'

"'What's the good of lying there suffering?' she says.

"I didn't know, so I didn't tell her; and at last, after I'd been twisting about early one morning like a skinned eel, she sent for the doctor, and he came.

"Curious thing, pain, ain't it? I often think, that it would do some of these fellers as ill-use horses good if they had a sharp twist or two of right down real, genuine agony. I ain't going to say that I never hits

a horse, because I do, you know, when he's a bit lazy or troublesome ; but I never lay the whip on him unless it's necessary, and I'll do as much with my horses with kindness, as you will with kicks, and blows, and swearing.

“ Well, I beg your pardon, you know, when I say *you* will by swearing, and kicks, and blows, I do not mean you yourself, you know, but people in general as handles the ribbins.

“ Of course the best way to a horse's affections is feeding him, but it's wonderful what sense there is in the poor dumb beasts ; and talking about pain puts me in mind of one 'oss as I used to drive. He was a chestnut 'oss, he was, as pretty a creature as ever you saw. Been a carriage 'oss, but the hair was taken off one of his shoulders, and through that blemish he came in our service. Never touched him with the whip, I didn't, not to hit him ; give him a gentle stroke down to take off the flies, or to lay his hair straight, I would, and he'd never flinch nor move, he knew my ways so well, and when I spoke he'd turn his head round and look at me, if his head was free enough, with them two great sensible eyes of his, so that we was quite friends.

“ I've done what I never told anyone before—I've given the stableman who had him in charge more than one shilling so as no other driver should get 'my chestnut,' as I got to call him ; and off and on I drove him three years, till one morning Wispey Joe, as he had him in charge, says to me, he says : ‘ Chestnut's rough. Got the staggers, I think.’

“ I went into the stable in a hurry, for I was a bit late, and there, sure enough, was the poor 'oss with his legs stretched out like those of a stool, and his head

down ; but as soon as he heard my voice he whinnied, and roused up, making his halter rattle through the ring as he turned round to me, and I went up and patted him, and found that he hadn't touched his corn, while he was all of a sweat.

“‘Come, old feller,’ I says ; and I stirred his food up a bit, and, as if understanding me, he put his nose in the manger, but he only blew the meat about—good bruised oats and chopped meat it was, too—and then he looks up at me again, as much as to say, ‘It’s no good—I can’t feed.’

“So I took a handful of stuff out and held it to him, stroking his forelock with t’other hand, and he made a try at it, and then gave a regular sigh, and hung down his poor old head.

“Well, I was obliged to go, for time was up ; so I gave him a pat or two, and Wispey Joe a pint of beer to take care of him, and then, werry heavy-hearted and sad, I went on to the box, thinking a good deal about that there horse, for we seemed to have got to be such friends. ‘Tst,’ I’d say, and them willing old shoulders of his would shoot into the collar till I checked him. He *was* willing, and always seemed to be trying to show me how he could pull.

“It was quarter-past eleven that night when I turned into the yard and got off the box. ‘How’s the chestnut ?’ I says to Joe. ‘Good as gone,’ he says. ‘The vet’s with him now, and one of the foremen.’

“I goes into the stable, along past the heels of a dozen horses, to where there was a lanthorn burning, and as I got up I saw my poor chestnut rear, strike his head against the roof, and then fall down on his side, kicking and moaning as if in pain, and lifting his

pore head up and letting it fall again upon the heap of straw they had put in his stall. Poor old fellow! they'd put plenty of straw in to keep him from hurting himself as he lay there on his side throwing out his heels, and beating against the wooden side of the place with his hoofs. It was a pitiful sight, and I soon learnt that the veterinary surgeon had done all he could, but had very little hopes of him. He said it was some kind of inflammation with a long name; but I was taking more notice of my poor horse than of what he said.

“‘You’d best not go near him,’ he said, ‘the poor thing is dangerous.’ But before he’d finished speaking I was down on my knees in the straw with that faithful old head on my arm; and as I spoke, the poor thing turned up its muzzle and whinnied at me so pitifully, and let it fall again, that to have saved my life, ma’am, I couldn’t have helped it, but leaned down over him, and the nat’ral softness of the man came dripping from my eyes, hot and fast, as it seemed to me that I was going to lose my poor old chestnut.

“Of course it was very weak and childish, but then we are all weak and childish sometime or another; and you know it was almost in the dark, while I had my back to the two men looking on, besides being ever so far inside the stall. So for about a minute I went on like that, and then I said a few words to the poor thing again; and as often as I did so he tried to raise his head and whinny, and let it fall again.

“I never saw so pitiful a sight before; and I couldn’t have believed in a dumb beast being so human in its

actions; for there were the poor strained dim eyes lifted up to mine in that quiet sensible way in which a horse can look, and then he'd whinny again, when he'd seem to have a fit of agony come on, and kick at the side of the stall, but not near me, for I was behind his head. Then several times the poor thing staggered up to his feet, and reared again and again, striking his head against the roof; and at such times I had to get out of his way, or he might have fallen on me; but the greater part of the time he was lying on his side upon the straw, with his old head on my arm. Perhaps it's foolish of me—perhaps it ain't—but I fancy he was easier with his head there, and when the fits of pain came on and he kicked, he did it more quietly. However, I know one thing, and that is, that whenever I spoke to him, right up to the last, he tried to answer me after his fashion, and turned his muzzle towards me.

“I forgot all about being tired that night, and as it was necessary that someone should sit up, why, I let Wispey go and lie down in the loft while I stopped with the chestnut. It was a strange night, that was, to pass there in that stable by the light of a lanthorn; and it's wonderful how being here in this hospital has put me in mind of it over and over again. Now and then a horse would be fidgeting his halter in the rings; but mostly all was quiet but my poor horse moaning gently, and it soon came home to me that he was getting weaker and weaker. He seldom got up now, and when he kicked out it was feebly, while more than once he turned his head round as if to see whether I was there.

"I don't want to pass such another night, ma'am ; it was too much like being with a fellow creature ; and I'm afraid I shouldn't have felt it any more deeply if it had been with a relation. I know it sounds stupid and unnatural, but poor men haven't many friends, and that chestnut horse was one of mine.

"It was just getting towards daylight when the poor thing, as had been very quiet for some time, began to get restless, and throw out its legs again as it laid on its side, just as if it was galloping, and then it lay still again and only moaned. I spoke to him and he lifted his head just a little way, but it fell back, and after a few minutes, during which I felt as I had never felt before—as if, even with this poor beast, there was something awful about to take place—I spoke to him again, just as I had been used to do, while one hand was under his head, me kneeling behind him in the straw, and the other hand resting on his nose—I spoke to him again, and I could feel him try to lift his head, but he didn't. Then the light shining on his great staring eyes, I either saw, or fancied I did, the tears rolling out of them—but I'm not sure, for I could not see clear just then ; while, after a few minutes' silence, I half started to my feet, frightened like, for the chestnut gave a wild hollow cry, that you could have heard all through the mews, and then there was a shivering run through him, and it was all over. Not as I knew it though, till Wispey Joe spoke to me, for the horse's cry had woke him up.

"He was a good horse, and I hope he's gone where there's pleasant green pastures and clear flowing rivers,

such as I used to hear about when I had a chance of going to a place of worship. Perhaps it's wrong to think such things as that there's a place after this life for poor dumb beasts ; but many of 'em almost seems to need something to look forward to, for they gets a sorry time of it here, -what with blows, and kicks, and bad living ; and I don't care, but a man who'd be wilfully a brute to a dumb animal wouldn't be werry partickler about being a brute to his brother man. I offended one of our drivers one day, after he'd been a thrashing a horse, by asking some one which was the brute—the horse or the man.

“ And that's all about that poor old chestnut, and I daresay you'll laugh at me for being so soft about him, but we all have strange feelings at times, and I hope as everyone as puts on a bit of crape for one as is gone to his long home, feels his loss as truly as I did that of my poor old 'oss.

“ ‘ Here have I been fidgetted to death about you,’ the missus says. ‘ Come, sit down, and have a bit of breakfast. Can't eat ? Nonsense ! What ? ’

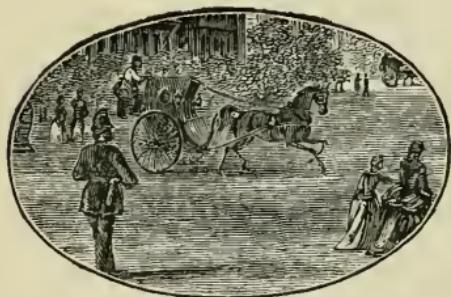
“ ‘ The poor old chcstnut's dead,’ I says ; and she never pressed me no more.

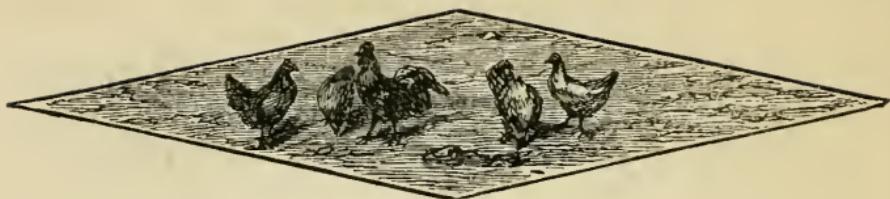
“ But, lor' ma'am, only to think of it. I began telling you about my rheumatics coming on again here, and went right off about the old chestnut horse.”

“ Poor horse ! ” I said, and rose to go.

“ Must you go so soon, ma'am,” he said ; “ well, yes, I suppose so, but time does seem so long here listening to other fellows who are ill and groaning, and your coming did cheer me up so it made my tongue run like anything. Good bye, ma'am, good bye.”

And now, once more out in dreary Gower Street, and even as I went along some one was being taken towards the hospital in a cab, but I had not the heart then to look within.





CHAPTER XIX.

MY OLD BOOKSELLER.



IT was some six months after, that, finding myself in the neighbourhood, I made a point of going down the North London road so as to call on the old couple, who had had charge of the house.

But the substantial and eligible residence had been let, while half a dozen rain soaked carcasses had been plastered up; and seeing a board with an attractive notice I concluded that they would be there and I was right: they were in charge of a wretchedly damp place.

They smiled a welcome to me as they answered the door together, and, learning that I was not house-seeking but a visitor, I was soon sitting chatting to them, and found that they were only too willing to communicate their affairs to me, though the old lady was

suffering from a touch of pleurisy, and she was very quiet.

That visit was one of several, and during one of them the old man told me how he had been a bookseller, but had failed. Then he had gone into the second-hand book trade, and done pretty well for a time, but at last he had failed over that.

“He used to give too good prices for the old books,” said the old lady, smiling.

“Well, yes, I was a bit too easy,” he said. “It was very pleasant though, and I liked it, and some of the happiest days of my life were spent in my dusty shop.”

“Yes,” said the old lady with a sigh, “we were happy enough there, but you used to give too much for the old books.”

“Ah! perhaps so,” said the old man, “but look at the advantages we enjoyed of a constantly changing, ebbing and flowing library, filled with works of all dates, from the shabby, fingered copy of a year old, right back to black-letter times, and even beautifully clear illuminated manuscript works, perfect marvels of neatness and labour.

“Then, too, we had a wonderful chance of studying human nature—not only from the buying side like your new booksellers, but from the selling side; and let me tell you that the purchasers of our books were not your light, flippant people who buy a volume for its gilt back and showy binding, but those who want books for their contents. Why it’s a study alone to sit watching the books outside, so as to be on the alert for those bibliomaniacs who take copies off the outer stall and forget to replace them. It’s a perfect study,

I assure you, to see people stop and take up first one and then another volume, till they happen on something which takes their interest, and then to see the play of their countenances, as forgetful of the lapse of time, they read on and on till the book is either laid down with a sigh, or purchased—more often the former than the latter.

“ But it is from the selling side that we see most, or else I have always paid more heed to this class ; and a strange one it is too, for we buy of some curious customers at times. Now by chance one buys a whole library belonging to some one deceased—now a lot of a broker who has purchased the whole effects of some one in trouble, or about to move a great distance ; but more often we get our stock in trade from people who bring little lots of half-a-dozen or a dozen books at a time, and are glad enough to take anything for them. For they know well enough that old books possess a very different value to the same works at the publishers. Of course there are some which are always valuable ; but the generality of your light frothy works come down so that I could get any number of three-volume, guinea-and-a-half sets of novels at from ninepence to eighteenpence the set.

“ Most of your selling customers are reckless, and dab down a score of old books with a ‘ What’ll you give me for these ? ’ But sometimes we had people come who had seen better days ; and then it becomes painful, and I hated to offer them the current value of the works they had brought themselves to part with most unwillingly. They were generally books they had bought in happier days, or had presented to them : and

perhaps after making some calculation at home as to the amount they can raise upon these works, the look of stony despair that came over their faces was something pitiful ; for, you see, trade is trade, and when things have a current value in the market, however well one may feel disposed towards those in trouble, one is obliged to be hard-hearted, and to think of the business part alone.

“ But I couldn’t always do it ; there are times when things go home to your feelings, and a case occurred to me once when I was sorely put out. You see, one day I was sitting in my old shabby dusty coat amongst my books, taking a peep here, and a dip there, just as it was my custom to do, when a tall, pale girl, dressed in shabby black, entered the shop with a large moreen bag containing four great quarto volumes. These she placed upon the counter, with the request that I would give her as much for them as they were worth.

“ I looked at the books, then at my visitor, then at the books again, and I felt in a manner that I would much rather they had been taken elsewhere. I was not romantic—all the romance was rubbed off my character like so much silver plating sixty years ago, to leave only the copper quite bare ; but I knew well enough that my first words would give a lady who was in distress great pain, and, therefore, I dreaded to speak ; for it was all plain enough written in that poor girl’s face—beaten-down pride, struggle with poverty, the desire to keep up appearances, and all compelled to give way to the hunger which would take no denial.

“ But business was business ; she had come in

obedience to urgent need, and I knew it was cruelty to keep her in suspense.

“‘ How much do you ask for these, ma’am?’ I said.

“‘ I would much rather you made me an offer,’ was the timid reply—one that I half dreaded to hear; for I knew that any offer I could make must pain her terribly; so I backed out, telling her it was not the custom, and so on, when, after much hesitation, she asked me to give her a pound for them, which I could have declared was only about half what she hoped to obtain, yet dared not ask. And yet the sum was more than double what I ought to give for such a work, though most likely it was published at seven or eight pounds—seven pounds ten, I am nearly sure, was the published price.”

“ He always would give too much for the books,” said the old lady.

“ What was I to do? I felt sorry for the poor girl; but then I couldn’t afford to feel sorry, and to sympathise in a solid fashion with everybody who came to me to sell books on account of being in distress; and at last of all I let business win the day, declaring that I could not afford such a price, and telling myself that I was giving half-a-crown too much in offering ten shillings.

“ She said nothing, merely passed the books over towards me, and as I took four half-crowns out of my till and placed them on the counter, I saw the little fingers, all sore and worn with needlework, trembled as they picked the money up, and a half-suppressed sigh the poor girl gave seemed to go right to my heart.

“ The next moment she had glided from the shop, leaving me fighting with feelings that were rather strange to me, till I was obliged to give in, and confess that I was wanting in sympathy and humanity towards one sore in distress.

“ ‘ You ought to have given what she asked.’ whispered Conscience, ‘ and you would not have felt the loss.’

“ ‘ But business—trade—current prices,’ I muttered in defence.

“ ‘ Go and take her the other ten shillings,’ said Conscience ; and, without another word of defence, I took the money from the till, locked it, and hurried out of the shop, leaving no one to mind it, for my wife was out, and ran down the street, looked up this turning, along that, in every direction I could think of ; but in vain ; the poor girl was gone.

“ I felt more disappointed than I could have thought possible as I turned back ; but I consoled myself with the thought that she would come again ; for when people of a decent class once began to sell me books, they came again and again, many times over ; and I have remarked that they mostly began with a few shabby old worthless volumes, and gradually got on to those which were more valuable, though this was not the case here.

“ I hurried back to the shop, when, as a matter of course, there was some one there ; for though you may often wait all day for a customer, most likely if you get out of the way for five minutes, somebody comes. In this case it was an old clergyman, who had taken up one of the four quarto volumes, and just giving me a nod, he stood there reading for, I should think, quite

a quarter of an hour, and then asked the price of the books.

“‘ Two pounds,’ I said, for I seemed to fancy that he would try to bate me down to half. But no ; he pulled out his old net purse, shook out a couple of sovereigns, put two volumes under one arm and two under the other, and marched out of the shop.

“‘ This is a curious sort of day,’ I thought to myself; and somehow or other I felt so put out, that when my boy came back from an errand, after being not more than twice as long gone as he should have been, I boxed his ears—both of them—with the first and second volumes of an abridged Froissart, and then threw a pocket Nugent at him for snuffling and muttering in the corner.

“ For I was really put out and hurt and annoyed ; and I know I once called myself a wretched old miser.

“ Well, a week passed, during which I had a fight with myself as to how much of these two pounds I ought to give to that poor girl if she called again. Business said I should be very generous if I gave her ten shillings ; but my heart seemed to say, would it not be better to give it all ? However, I could not settle it either one way or the other, even though I turned it over and over in bed at night, and let it half rob me of my rest ; and when one day I was dipping into an old copy of Chaucer I had just bought, in came my fair young customer to find me as undecided as ever.

“‘ Let me see,’ I said, turning red as a found out schoolboy, ‘ I don’t think, ma’am, we made a correct settlement over those last books, which I have just sold ; ’ and in a clumsy, awkward fashion I laid down a sovereign and a half, in a way, in fact, that looked so



"I TOOK FOUR HALF-CROWNS OUT OF MY TILL AND PLACED THEM ON
THE COUNTER"—(see p. 230).

like offering charity, that my visitor's pale face became suffused in an instant, and she replied coldly—

“ ‘ You paid me the price you offered for the books, sir, and are evidently labouring under some mistake.’

“ I felt more like one found out than ever; and I believe that if my boy had been within reach I should have kicked him severely, as I blundered, and asked, in a confused, stupid way, what were her commands, when she laid half a dozen volumes before me.

“ ‘ If you won’t take it one way, you shall another,’ I muttered, as I seemed to recover myself a bit; for I could see that she looked more pinched and haggard than at the last visit. So I took up the books, turned them over, examined the binding, the title-pages, the *finis*, put them down and took a pinch of snuff—every moment growing more confident, and chuckling to myself as I thought of what I meant to do. I shook my head at one volume, as I began to go over them again; screwed up my mouth at another; made a wry face at a third; and pitched a fourth contemptuously aside, watching her out of the corner of my eye the while; and I could see her face working, and a tear drop down upon her dress.

“ ‘ Weak, poor soul,’ I muttered; and I went on turning the books over, and keeping her on the rack, expecting every moment that she would speak. Then I muttered something about the date and edition, laid them all together, and held them up to examine the backs; and once more laid them on the counter, and took snuff, with my under lip thrust out, shaking my head the while.

“ ‘ Perhaps I could bring you some other books that would be more saleable,’ she said, at last; and I could

hardly keep up my acting as I listened to the poor child's trembling voice, and watched her quivering lips.

“ ‘They’re saleable enough,’ I said, ‘at a price, though—at a price ;’ and I stared at her very hard.

“ ‘I only want what you consider to be the value of them,’ she answered sadly, ‘I——

“ She stopped short, having evidently been about to say something of which she repented.

“ ‘Well,’ I said coolly, ‘I’m afraid that I can’t give you more than a couple of pounds for them,’ and I pushed them across the counter, as if expecting her to snatch them away and hurry out of the shop.

“ ‘Two—two pounds,’ she stammered, and then her eyes rested upon me so pitifully, that if I had not had spectacles on, I could not have kept up my character. But I kept on looking her full in the face, seeing her flush a little as if resenting what I said, then turn paler than before, as she seemed to be unable to comprehend whether I was in earnest, or merely seeking an excuse for helping her. In a few moments she appeared to decide that the latter was the case, and drawing herself up proudly, she took the books, but only to clutch the next moment at the counter, as the place swam before her eyes, and I had hardly time to open the flap and catch her in my arms before she had fainted dead away.

“ I carried her into my little back room and laid her upon the sofa there, with bookshelves all around, and my wife bathed her poor pale face, and chafed her hands till she gave two or three sighs, and her eyes began slowly to open, and she gazed up at the ceiling in a strange vacant way, till her gaze fell upon our

withered old faces, when catching my hands in hers, she kissed them and began to sob bitterly.

“There was no pride now; she had seen plainly enough my motive, and I could keep it up no longer, for being a weak, childish old fellow, whose thoughts would go back to some one who, had she lived, might have been just such a tall, graceful girl, my spectacles got so that I could not see through them, and when I spoke and tried to soothe her, it was in a cracked choking voice that I did not know for mine.

“She left us at last, taking the money I had obtained for the first four volumes, and leaving me the others to sell for her—that was how we settled it was to be; and I’m afraid there was a little deceit about those last books when she came again. And that time I went home with her to the one room she occupied with her mother, and I wanted no telling, it was all plain enough what they had suffered, and that when the poor girl came to me she was weak and faint for want of food.

“Her mother was lying upon a sort of sofa-bed when I went, and it had been arranged that I was to have come about some books; for the old lady, though she lay there in pain, worn to a shadow, and was busily sewing together little scraps of skins for the furriers, was that proud that she would have resented anything she could have called charity; so I was very respectful and quiet, and went away again with a couple of books, after asking leave to call again for more.

“Sometimes I think the poor lady must have seen through it all; but she made no sign, but kept it up till one day, surprised that I had not seen the

daughter for a week, I called to find her kneeling by the side of the couch ; for the furriers had lost one of their assistants, and the poor lady had gone to a happier home.

“ This all seems as if I were talking about how I did this, and how I did that ; but being so mixed up with it as I was, I can’t tell it all and leave myself out. The poor lady was laid to her rest, and after a deal of persuasion, her daughter consented to come and stay with us—to help make up a catalogue of my books, for until I thought of that, she would not hear of it. And in the long winter evenings I got to know a good deal about her and her family ; for the father had been a pensioned officer of the Indian army, who had died three years before, leaving his widow and child to exist on the sale of their furniture, and such money as they could earn by their needles.

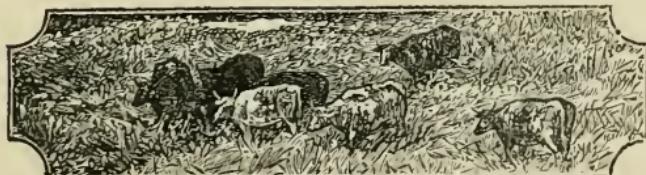
“ But I learned, too, that there was some one expected home from somewhere ; and he came one day, to be almost angry, at first, to find her in such condition ; but only to make us uncomfortable afterwards with his thanks for the little we had done.

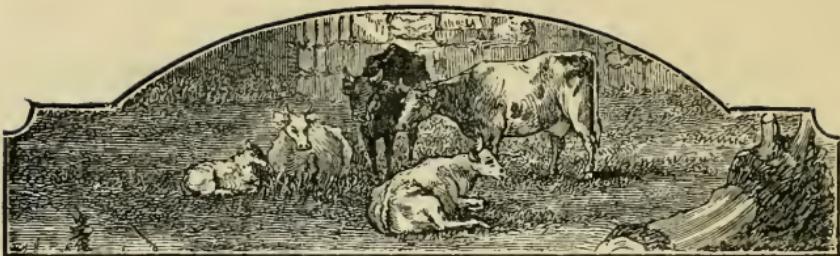
“ He took her away at last, and she came to see us again and again as his bonny wife—God bless her ! and then we went to see them many times, till they went away, over the seas, thousands of miles from here ; but I often picture her pale fair face, and her gentle ways, and feel again the kiss she gave me when she left ; and those thoughts seem to brighten up the present and make some of our dullest days a bit more cheery. And then we sit and think about the sorrows of this life, and the goodness by which they are assuaged ; and wonder whether it may please God that

we should see her face again—a face that seems to us like that of a dear child, for we should like to look upon it once again before we die."

But the old people never set eyes upon her again for at the end of a couple of months the damp place and the cold paving had been too much for the old bookseller, and he had died; while from the wife of a policeman in charge of the next house I learned how prophetic had been my thoughts respecting them at our first meeting. I recalled the simple act that I had seen —how the poor old lady had laid her hand affectionately upon her husband's arm—just, too, as at our last meeting, when sick herself, she had listened quietly to her old companion's words, and smilingly upbraided him for being too generous in his trade.

"They found her kneeling down, ma'am," said the policeman's wife, "just aside the bed, with her cheek upon his dead hand—she dead and cold too; and no wonder neither—the place was damp enough to kill a horse."





CHAPTER XX.

KATE'S ORDEAL.



I HAVE mentioned Mary Sanders to you as the dear friend drawn to my side by a trifling act of kindness during her illness. Some were good enough to say that I risked my life in attending her; but I don't know: I fancy the risk of catching a complaint is as great to those who take endless care as to those who take scarcely any. Ninety-nine precautions are taken, and the hundredth window is left open through which the disease enters unawares.

Be that as it may, I tended her, and we became great friends.

I have in my memory a little incident in her life, which I will endeavour to repeat almost in her own words as she told me one evening as we sat together. It was a story of her childhood—of what she called her baby days—before she had to go out into the world.

“‘Ah, those were good old times,’ she said, with a sigh, ‘when dear old Sally, our maid, used to scold us so. Then it used to be—and I remember one occasion well—the day Kate came down to us—‘There, you’re banging that door again, Miss Mary. I declare

to goodness you children would worrit the patience out of a saint.'

" ' Oh, never mind, Sally,' I said, panting, after a race to get into the house first—a race I had won, for Lil and Cissy were yards behind.

" ' Never mind, indeed ! ' cried Sally, ' and there's your fine cousin coming down to-day from London. I wonder what she will say when she sees you racing about the meadow like so many wild colts, and your arms all brown and scratched, and the hooks off your dress. I never see such children, never.'

" ' But you like us, Sally,' I said, getting hold of her rough, fat, red arm, and laying my cheek against it.

" ' I don't, I declare I don't,' she cried impetuously ; and to show her dislike she threw her arms round me, and squeezed my nose nearly flat against the piece of hard wood she used to wear inside her dress.

" Sally was our housemaid, parlour-maid, and nurse-maid all in one ; and it used to seem to me that she spent all her leisure time in quarrelling with the cook and snubbing us ; but, for all that, one of my principal recollections, during the fever I had so long, was waking at all times to see Sally's red face watching by my bedside ; and I know she did all cook's work for six weeks as well as her own, when the poor thing had such a sad accident and cut her hand.

" We three—Lil, Cissy, and I—had a long discussion about cousin Kate and her visit ; and we all felt what dreadful little ragamuffins we should seem to her, for I'm afraid we had been running wild ; though papa only used to laugh about it, and would come into the school-room when mamma was busy with us over our lessons, whenever it was a fine morning, and cry, ' Now

then, girls, the sun shines and the birds are calling. Out with you! Learn lessons when it rains.'

"I knew afterwards why this was. Papa had a horrible nervous dread of our growing up weak and sickly, for his was a delicate family; and I had heard that our cousins were often very ill.

"'I can guess why cousin Kate's coming to stay with us,' said Lil.

"'I know why she's coming,' I said.

"'It's because she's ill,' shouted Lil, for fear I should show my knowledge first.

"'Sally will take her up new warm milk and an egg in it before she gets out of bed in the morning,' said Cissy solemnly; 'that will soon make her well.'

"She shall have all the eggs Speckle lays,' said Lil, and Mary will take her every morning to the old garden-seat under the trees. She's sure to get well there.'

"And so we did, for cousin Kate came that afternoon—a tall, pale girl, with a sad weary look in her face, as she gazed wistfully from one to the other.

"We three girls stood back, quite in awe of the well-dressed, fashionable-looking body, who was so different from what we had expected, while mamma went up to welcome her, and took her in her arms in a tender affectionate way, saying, 'My dear child, we are so glad to see you.'

"Cousin Kate threw her arms round mamma's neck and burst into a fit of sobbing, hiding her face from our sight.

We girls did not see any more of our cousin Kate that day; but our young interest was deeply excited, and somehow, perhaps, fostered by dark hints dropped by Sally—who was a blighted flower, having been

crossed in a love affair with the horse-keeper at a neighbouring farm—we girls got to think of our cousin's illness as a kind of mystery connected in some way, how we did not know, with the heart.

“Our awe of the sweet gentle cousin fell off the very next day, when we took possession of her, and led her round our dear old country home, with its wilderness of an orchard, great garden, shrubberies, and pleasant meadow.

“Her coming seemed to mark an epoch in our young lives, for, seeing how weak and delicate she was, we used to vie one with the other in being quiet and gentle, waiting upon her in the most unnecessary way, like slaves, and always ready to rush off most willing messengers to forestall any little wants she expressed.

“This came natural to us; but on my part it was increased by a few words which I heard pass between mamma and papa, mamma saying that she did not think poor Kate would ever grow strong again, but slowly wither away. I gave a great gulp as I heard those words, and then burst out sobbing violently.

“‘You here, Mary!’ said mamma. ‘Well, my dear, as you have heard what we said, it must be your secret too. Never let your poor cousin know what we think, and never behave to her as if you thought she could not recover.’

“I promised readily, and at fourteen the possession of that secret seemed to make me more womanly than my sisters, as I redoubled my tenderness to the suffering girl.

“The invalid was twenty-one—a great age in our estimation—and I used to look up to her with venera-

tion, gazing in her soft sweet face and wistful eyes, wondering why she was so ill, and what was the great sorrow that had come upon her like a blight upon one of the roses round our porch.

“Cousin Kate came to us in the spring, and the months flew by till it was the height of summer; and many and many a night had I turned my face to the wall, so that Lil should not know, and cried silently till my pillow was wet. For I knew so well that Kate was weaker, much weaker than when she came, a walk across the lawn to the old garden-seat in the shade being as much now as she could bear.

“‘Cousin Kate,’ I said, one day when we were alone, Lil and Cissy having rushed off to get some flowers, ‘couldn’t any doctor make you well?’

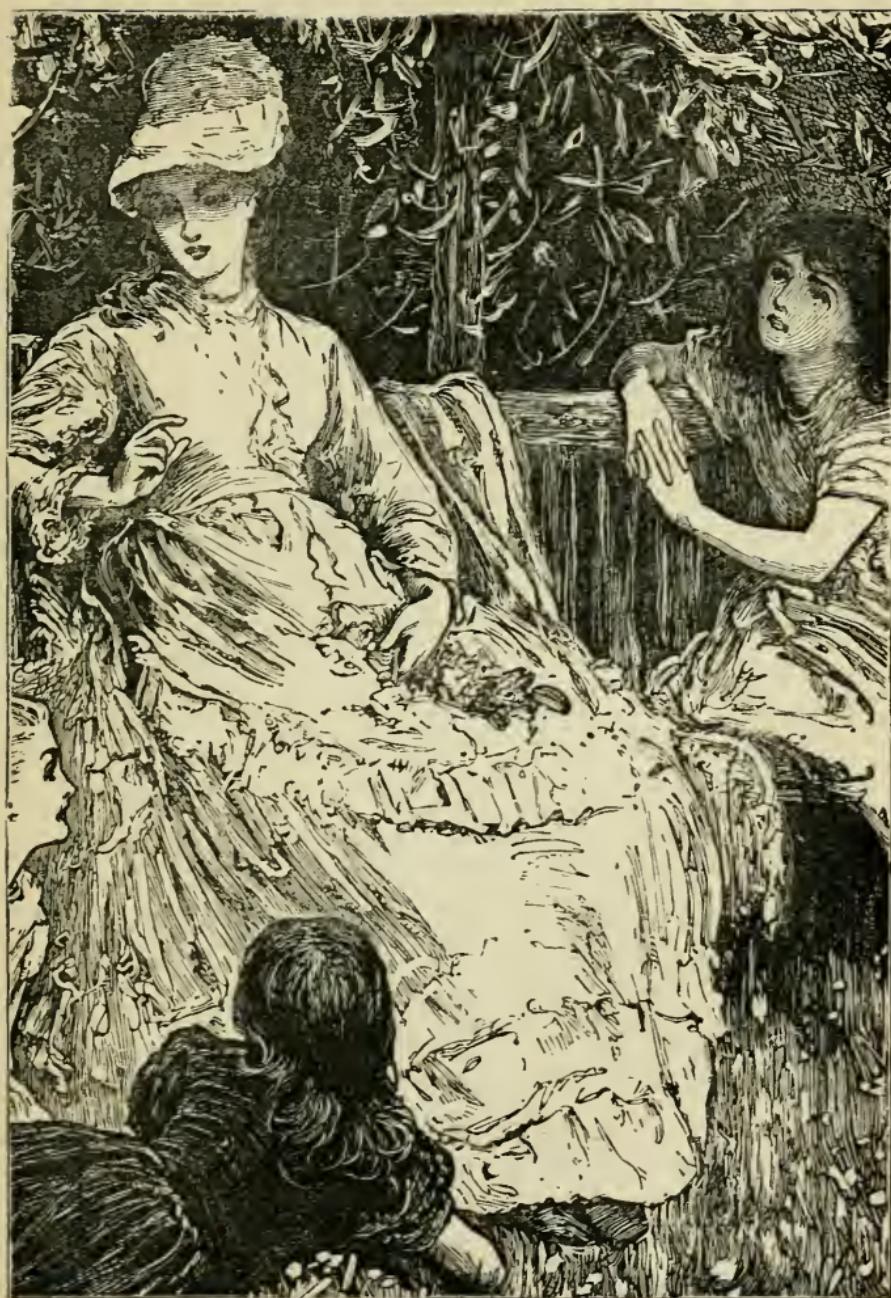
“She looked at me with a wild strange gaze which almost startled me, before she replied, and then in a way that made my heart beat she sobbed out—

“‘Only one—only one!’ and then as if to herself, in a low whisper, she added, ‘and before he can come I shall be dead—dead!’

“She did not know I heard her last words, and I sat chilled and frightened, gazing at her till my sisters came back, when, as we frequently did, we sat down about her; Lil got upon the seat, Cissy sat on the grass with her head against one of Kate’s hands, which hung listlessly from the corner where she leaned, and I threw myself on the grass at her feet, so as to look up in her gentle face, which had now become calm with its old weary look.

“‘Cousin Kate,’ said Lil, ‘tell us another story.’

“‘No, no,’ I said, ‘don’t ask; she isn’t so well to-day.’



"ONCE UPON A TIME"—(see p. 247).



“ ‘Yes,’ she said quietly, raising her head and looking at me, ‘I am better to-day.’

“ ‘Tell us one, then,’ cried Cissy eagerly,—‘one you’ve never told us before.’

“ There was silence then for a few minutes, and as I gazed up in Kate’s face I saw her eyes close, and a sort of spasm twitch her lips; but the next minute she was quite calm, and then with the leaves whispering round us, and the twittering of the birds coming now and again from the distance, she said in a low, sweet, musical voice—

“ ‘Once upon a time, in the days of long ago, when people were very, very happy on this earth, there lived a prince who was young, and handsome, and true. Nearly every one loved him, he was so manly and yet so gentle.’

“ ‘And he loved a beautiful princess,’ put in Cissy.

“ I saw the spasm cross cousin Kate’s face again, but it was calm directly after, and she went on.

“ ‘No, dear,’ she said, ‘he did not love a beautiful princess, but a poor simple girl who loved him too, with all her heart, and they were so, so happy. When the flowers blossomed they seemed to blossom only for them, and the birds sang their sweetest songs for them in the bright sunshiny days.’

“ ‘Yes, and they were married, and lived happy ever after,’ cried Cissy. ‘Go on.’

“ There was once more that piteous look upon cousin Kate’s face, seen only by me; but it passed off, and she went on.

“ ‘No, Cissy, they were not, for the poor, handsome young prince had enemies—cruel, bitter enemies—who slandered him, and said that he had made false keys,

and opened the treasure-chests of a great man, and stolen away his gold and precious stones.'

" 'Oh ! ' whispered Cissy, now deeply interested.

" 'And,' continued Kate, 'they took the poor prince, and there was a great trial, and though he declared he was innocent, the wicked people who slandered him and bare false witness against him prevailed ; and the great judge said that he was to be cast into prison, and wear heavy chains, and be kept there for long and weary years.'

" 'Oh ! ' cried Lil.

" 'Yes,' said Cissy, 'I know, and then the simple young girl, who loved him, went and unlocked the prison gates, and struck off his chains and set him free.'

" 'No—no,' cried cousin Kate, and her voice altered terribly, so that I was alarmed, though I could do nothing but gaze up in the wild face before me, for now a change came over it. 'No,' she cried, 'the poor girl could do nothing but sit and weep, and feel her broken heart beat—beat—beat, in its own prison, wearing itself out till—till she died, and— Oh, Frank ! Frank ! what have we done that we should suffer this ?'

" I leaped up to throw my arms round her, while my sisters shrank away alarmed ; for cousin Kate turned from us with a bitter wail, buried her face in her hands, and threw herself half over the arm of the old garden seat, sobbing in a wild hysterical way, such as I had never seen before. ' Kate, dear cousin Kate,' I sobbed ; but even as I spoke there was a hasty step on the gravel, the bushes were dashed aside, and the shadow of a tall man was cast over us.

“ ‘ Kate—darling ! ’ he cried, catching her in his arms, as I was thrust rudely aside, ‘ I am innocent and free.’

“ She did not hear him, for she gave a faint gasp and sank back insensible.

“ We three girls were almost stunned ; but we saw the tall, thin, pale-looking stranger hastily lift poor Kate from the seat, and literally run with her to the house, while we followed more slowly.

“ As we reached the porch it was to meet papa running out, and in a very short time he returned with the doctor. But this doctor was the wrong one ; the right one had come to us at the garden-seat, and it was his words that brought dear cousin Kate back to life, and in the course of a few months to health.

“ For Frank Roberts was reinstated in the Government offices from which he fell—in a higher post, one which gave him the confidence of the chief officials ; while the man through whose treachery poor Frank had suffered a year and a half before, died confessing that he had been the guilty party alone.

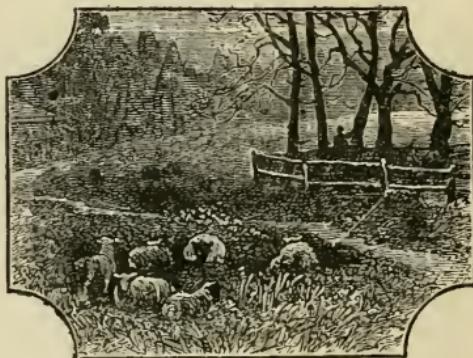
“ Oh ! those happy days when the roses were coming back day by day into cousin Kate’s cheek, and when Frank, who was down at the old place every Saturday to stay till Monday, used to be sent to play and romp with us girls. I can hardly believe that twenty years have glided by since then, but so it is ; and to this day we call dear old grey-whiskered Frank, ‘ Kate’s Prince.’ ”

“ You never told me, Mary,” I said, “ how it was that you came to be with Madame.”

“ Did I not ? ” she said. “ Oh, it was the old story—misfortunes at home, and the determination to go out

into the world and try to earn my own living, so as to cease to be a burden upon my parents. It is a good thing that efforts are being made to find work for women."

"Yes," I said, "it has been a vexed question for years, and it comes very hard upon us, that there are so few openings. Still matters are improving year by year, and I think we may venture to hope for better things ere long."





CHAPTER XXI.

COBWEB'S FATHER.



REMEMBERING as you will my unhappy lot, you will not feel surprised that I should take a deep interest in what people call the love affairs of the young, but which I look upon as something too great and holy to be spoken of with anything but reverence and respect. For that attraction that draws youth to youth in the bright springtime of

their lives, what is it but a heaven-implanted instinct that leads the stronger to take the weaker under his protection, and joins two hearts in a compact of love for life, giving to each a true counsellor, a tender companion, and a shield of strength to bear the troubles of this world ?

It has been in no busy, old-maidish, envious spirit that I have watched these affairs. I have never been one to hurry into a church to see a wedding, for I was

never present at one in my life ; but I have felt a kind of joy that I cannot express when I have seen some fine manly young fellow grow softened in his manner, and gradually become chivalrous and attentive to some sweet maiden, for it has revived old memories of the past, and set me dreaming of what might have been had it not been otherwise willed.

One thing has often struck me, and that is the natural selfishness that is brought out in a father, and the feeling of half-dislike with which he looks upon the man who comes, as it were, to rob him of the soft sweet maiden whom he has had growing closer and closer round his heart. I have often tried to put myself in his place, and when I have so done I have easily felt how painful it must be to draw the line between the two natural affections there are in the girl's heart—the love of her father and that for the man who seeks to make her his wife.

The selfish feeling is but natural, and the father must feel heartwrungr as he fancies that his child's love is going from him fast, and he trembles with dread at the thought that his little ewe lamb is about to be taken away from the fold, to be plunged into endless trouble and care ; to encounter storms from which he has shielded her heretofore ; and he wonders how she would bear such troubles as have fallen to his and her mother's lot, forgetting that every life must inevitably be one of storm and calm.

“ I noted all this particularly in the case of a friend of the Smiths, a Mr. Burrows, with whom and his family I became very intimate. He was a successful City man, who had engaged with great shrewdness in trade, and amassed a considerable amount of money.

He and Mr. Smith were great friends, and were wont to advise each other, Mr. Burrows placing great faith in the sturdy sewing-machine dealer in most things ; but there had been a great deal of difference in the two men, the selfishness of which I have spoken and jealousy about his daughter being the predominant points in Mr. Burrows, who was lavish with his money, while Smith, who had had a far harder struggle to get on, always seemed to have an intense affection for his banking account.

It was long after the change had taken place in Mr. Burrows that I came to know so much as I did, and it was during one or other of my pleasant little runs down to his home in Sussex, where he passes all the time that he can persuade himself to steal from the City.

“ Come, Miss Stoneleigh,” he used to say, “ have a run down amongst the buttercups and daisies. I’m going to steal three days. Come down with me.”

“ Steal ! ” I said smiling, “ I wonder you don’t give up business and live altogether in the country.”

“ Why ? ” he said wonderingly.

“ Report says that you are very wealthy.”

“ Report’s a stupid old woman ! ” he said sharply ; “ and I suppose, if the truth was known, Report was that money-grubbing, tight-fisted old screw—Smith. Confess now : wasn’t it ? ”

“ Well, yes ; I’ve heard Mr. Smith say so, among others,” I replied.

“ Yes, of course,” he said sturdily. “ But look here, Miss Stoneleigh, you don’t think I’m scraping and saving——”

“ I never said you scrape and save, Mr. Burrows,” I

said ; " I always thought you generous to a fault. Why, look at the money you've given me for my poor peo——"

" Stuff—nonsense—bosh ! " he exclaimed. " There, if you say another word, I'll button up my cheque-book tight, and never give you a farthing again."

" I am Silence personified," I exclaimed.

" I don't want to go to the City," he exclaimed, taking hold of my sleeve and speaking very earnestly, in his desire that I should not think him mercenary ; " but suppose I didn't go on making money, and anything happened to Grantly—how then ? "

" My dear Mr. Burrows," I said, " never let us try to meet troubles half-way."

" Yes," he said, " that's all very well, but then look at the ants and bees, you know. You must make preparations for the worst. Grantly's a fine fellow, and makes a lot of money by his pictures ; but he don't save, and I've got to think of those two little ones. I say," he cried, the hard look going out of his face to give way to one of bright genuine pleasure, " you must come down. You never saw such a pair of young tyrants in your life. I can't get rid of them. They hang on to me all day long. I have to go up and kiss them in bed, or else they won't go ; and I'm woke up every morning by one or the other of them climbing into mine. I tell Cobweb I shall stop away."

" And she will not believe it," I said smiling.

" Humph ! No : I suppose she won't. But, I say ; little Cobweb got her tiny arms round my neck the other morning, and her soft little cheek rested up against my rough old phiz, and she says, in her little silvery voice—' Oh ! granpa, dear, I do yove oo

so !' and then little Frank kicked and screamed to get to me to tell me he loved me too, ever so much. They pretty nearly tear me to pieces."

"Poor man!" I said, as I looked at his softened face and kind nature breaking through the hard City crust.

"That's right," he said, "laugh at me. Regular old gander ain't I. Never mind: you come down and see if the two young tyrants don't soon take you about in chains."

"Daisy chains?" I said, laughing.

"Yes, if you like," he said; "but they are chains you can't break. Ah!" he continued, as he thoughtfully stirred the cup of tea I had had made for him, it only seems but yesterday that I went home and said to Cobweb, 'I've found the place, my dear.'

"'You have papa?' she said.

"'I have.'

"'Not a dreadful detached villa or *cottage ornée*, papa?'

"'Oh, no.'

"'With admirably planned kitchen and flower gardens?'

"'No,' said I, laughing.

"'With an extensive view of the Surrey Hills?'

"'Why, any one would think you were a house agent, Cobweb,' I said, smiling.

"'No wonder, papa, when I've been reading so many advertisements. But do tell me; have you really found the place at last?'

"'I have really, my dear—at least, I think so.'

"'Is it a real, old-fashioned country house?'

"'Yes.'

"'Smothered in clematis and roses and honeysuckle?'

“ ‘ Yes, and swarming with birds’ nests and insects.’

“ ‘ And with a regular great wilderness of a garden ? ’

“ ‘ Yes.’

“ ‘ In which you can lose yourself ? ’

“ ‘ Yes, and in the wood too.’

“ ‘ What ! is there a wood ? ’

“ ‘ Acres of it.’

“ ‘ And plenty of fruit and flowers ? ’

“ ‘ Plenty to make you ill and to litter the house.’

“ ‘ And purply plums, and ruddy apples, and soft downy peaches, and great rich Morello cherries ? ’

“ ‘ Yes, yes, yes, and cabbages, and turnips, and ’tatoes, and beans, and brockylo enough to supply a greengrocer’s shop,’ I cried testily.

“ ‘ And it doesn’t look new, and stiff, and bricky ; and isn’t overlooked by the neighbours, who hang out washing ; and there are no organs, nor cabs, nor street-singers ? ’

“ ‘ No, no, no, no, child. It’s just what you asked me to get—old, and rugged, and picturesque, and inconvenient, and damp, and littered with leaves, and four miles from any railway-station ; and now I hope you’re happy.’

“ ‘ Oh, I am, dear, dear, dear father ! ’ she cried, seating herself on my knee, and nestling her head on my shoulder.

“ ‘ There, hold up your head,’ I said, “ and look at me. Now tell me frankly, did you ever see such a weak, stupid old man in your life ? ”

“ ‘ I like weak, stupid old men,’ she said archly ; and her eyes twinkled with merriment, and then softened with the tears that stole into them.

“ ‘ Yes,’ I said, ‘ because you can tyrannize over

them, and do what you please with them, and make them your slaves like you do me. A pretty rig I've been running this last two months to find a place you like—just as if Bryanston Square wouldn't do. I tell you what, my lady, you'll have to take pains to make me comfortable down there, for I shall be as dull and as heavy as lead.'

" 'No, you will not, pa dear,' she said, laughing, and then laying her cheek to mine. ' I am so glad. You've made me so happy, for I was very tired of London.'

" I did not answer, but sat looking down on the smooth peachy cheek that one of my hands would keep stroking, and at the long yellow hair that hung down over the shoulders in waves, and, in spite of myself, a sigh escaped my lips.

" Ruth—Cobweb, as I always called her, because she was so soft and downy—started up, gazing earnestly in my face, and then kissed me very, very fondly.

" 'Don't think about the past, dear father,' she said softly—she always called me father when she was serious.

" 'Can't help it, child,' I said mournfully; and then, seeing the tears gather in her eyes, I tried to be cheerful, and smiled as I added, ' I have the future as well as the past to make me sad, my dear.'

" She looked at me wonderingly, but did not speak, and I sat there holding her little hand to my heart as I thought of the past, and how ten years before, just as business was beginning to prosper with me, I was left alone with a little fair-haired girl of eight, who found it so hard to believe that her mother had been taken

away never to return, only to live in our memories. And I thought, too, of how the years had fled away, and I had become a wealthy man, whose sole thought had been of the child I had seen grow up to maidenhood, making a very idol of her, yielding to her every whim, and doing the most I could to spoil one who never would be spoiled. For, with all the accomplishments I had lavished upon her, Ruth had grown up to be a notable little housewife, who disgusted our cooks by insisting upon going down into the kitchen and making my favourite puddings and tarts with her own hands, and generally behaving in what the servants called an unladylike way.

“And then I thought of my other sorrow—the future—and pictured, with an agony I cannot describe, the day when I should have to resign my claims to another, and be left alone, a desolate, broken old man.

“I am naturally a very common, hard, and business-like fellow, and terribly selfish. Cobweb had woven herself so round my heart, that in my peevish, irritable way, I was never happy when home from the City without she was waiting on me—filling my pipe, mixing my one nightly glass of grog, upon which the butler frowned—in fact, he had once suggested to me that his late master of an evening always took port.

“Cobweb was very quiet as she glided down from my knee to her hassock at my feet, and was evidently thinking as much as I; and at last I brightened up, for a thought had come to me with a selfish kind of comfort.

“‘She’ll be quite away from all temptations to leave me, there, anyhow,’ I said to myself, as I thought of

the 'at-homes' and balls to which she was so often receiving invitations.

" This set me talking—fishing, as I called it in my great cunning—to see if there were one of the rocks ahead of which I was in dread.

" ' How shall you be able to leave all your fine friends—parties—and set-outs ? ' I said.

" ' Oh, I'm tired of them all ! ' she said clapping her hands.

" ' And gay cavaliers, with dandy airs and moustaches, and programmes.'

" ' Ha, ha, ha ! ' she laughed merrily ; and then, as it seemed to me in my jealous watchfulness, turning the subject, she began to talk about the country place I had taken.

" A fortnight later and we were settled down ; and really, spite of all my London notions, I began to find the calm and repose of the country delicious. Cobweb was delighted, and constantly dragging me somewhere or another into the grounds of the pretty old place, where she arranged garden seats in the snuggest, shadiest spots for my especial behoof.

" As I have said, there was a wilderness of a wood adjoining the garden, which the former possessor had left in a state of nature, saving that he had had the old footpaths and tracks widened in their old winding ways, carefully turfed, and dotted with a chair here and there.

" This was Cobweb's favourite place, and if I missed her out in the garden, I knew I should find her here, with the sun raining a shower of silver beams through

the network of leaves overhead, to dance and flash among the waving tresses of her long golden hair.

“One day I found her leaning on a dead bough which crossed an opening in the wood, where all seemed of a delicate twilight green. She was listening intently to the song of a bird overhead, and as I stopped short, gazing at the picture before me, I said to myself with a sigh—

“‘All that’s bright must fade ! My darling, I wish I had your likeness as you stand. Time flies.’ I muttered, ‘and the winter comes at last, with bare trees to the woods—grey hairs and wrinkles to the old.’

“She caught sight of me directly, and the scene was changed, for I was listening the next moment to her merry, happy voice.

“A day or two later I was in the City, where I always went twice a week—for I could not give up business, it was part of my life—when old Smith dropped in, and in the course of conversation he said—

“‘By the way, Burrows, why don’t you have your portrait painted ?’

“‘Bah ! stuff ! What for ?’ I said.

“‘Well,’ he said, laughing, ‘I don’t know, only that it would give a poor artist of my acquaintance a job ; and, poor fellow, he wants it badly enough.’

“‘Bah ! I’m handsome enough without being painted,’ I said gruffly. Then as a thought flashed through my mind—for I saw again the picture in the wood with Cobweb leaning on the branch—‘Stop a minute. Can he paint well ?’

“‘Gloriously.’

“‘ And is terribly hard up ? ’

“‘ Horribly, poor fellow.’

“‘ How’s that ? ’

“‘ Don’t know. He’s poor and proud, and the world has dealt very hardly with him. It isn’t so smooth with every one, Jack, as it is with us.’

“‘ True, Tom, old fellow,’ I said, ‘ true. Well, look here : I’ll give him a job. Would he come down and stay at my place ? ’

“‘ Oh, yes, if you treat him well ; but, as I tell you, he’s poor and proud, and quite a gentleman.’

“‘ Well, I’m not,’ I said testily. ‘ I’ll give him enough to eat, and a good bed to sleep on ; and he’ll have to put up with me dropping my ‘h’s.’ But,’ I added, slapping my pocket, ‘ I can pay him like a gentleman.’

“‘ Get out, you purse-proud old humbug ! ’ said Smith, laughing, as he clapped me on the shoulder. ‘ But there, I’m obliged to you. Have him down, and I’ll thank you. He’s a gentleman, and a man of honour.’

“‘ Oh, I’m not afraid he’ll steal the spoons,’ I said, laughing.

“‘ No,’ he said dryly, ‘ no fear of that. But you’ll make a good picture.’

“‘ Stuff ! ’ I said. ‘ Do you think I’m going to be painted ? ’

“‘ Why, what are you going to do, then ? ’ he asked in an astonished way.

“‘ Let him paint little Cobweb,’ I said, chuckling, and rubbing my hands.

“Smith gave a long whistle, and his fingers twitched

as if he were mending a sewing-machine, and after a few more words he left.

“It did not strike me then, but I remarked afterwards that he seemed disposed to draw back from his proposal; but I was now so wrapped up in my plans that I could think of nothing but the picture in the wood, and I went home full of it, meaning it for a surprise.

“Two days later one of the servants announced a Mr. Grantly on business, and, on his being shown in, I found myself face to face with a handsome, grave-looking man of about thirty. He was rather shabbily dressed, and looked pale and ill as he bowed to Cobweb and myself, ending by staring at my child, as I thought, in rather a peculiar way.

“This annoyed me—a stout, choleric, elderly man—for no one had a right to look at my Cobweb but me and I spoke rather testily as I said—

“‘Now, sir, when you please, I am at your service.’

“‘I beg your pardon.’ he said, in a low voice. “Miss Burrows, I presume. One moment, please—don’t move.”

“Cobweb was sitting in the bay-window, and, to my utter astonishment, he quickly drew one of the curtains, and then half closed another, so that the light fell strongly upon her hair.

“I could not speak for the passion bubbling up in my throat, and as I stood gasping, he came and took my arm, led me aside, and then, pointing to where Cobweb sat, as astounded as myself, he said—

“‘That would be admirable, sir. We could not improve that natural pose.’

“‘ What the dickens—— Are you mad, sir ? What do you mean ? ’

“‘ I beg your pardon,’ he said, flushing, and speaking hastily. ‘ I am so wrapped up in my profession. I thought you understood. Mr. Smith said you wished me to paint this young lady’s portrait. Am I mistaken ? ’

“‘ Chut ! ’ I ejaculated, cooling on the instant. ‘ I beg your pardon. Sit down, sir, sit down. You’re hungry, of course. How stupid of me ! — Cobweb, my dear, order some lunch into the dining-room.”

“ He smiled, returned the pressure of my hand in a frank, honest way that I liked, and then looked after my darling in a way that I did not like ; for this was not what I meant, and my jealousy was aroused. I expected some snuffy-looking old painter, not a grave handsome young fellow. But I remembered Tom Smith’s words—‘ He is a gentleman, and a man of honour’—and casting away my suspicious thoughts, I entered into the subject at once.

“‘ I’d half forgotten it,’ I said. ‘ She’ll make a good picture, eh ? ’

“‘ Admirable, sir. That position struck me at once as I entered.’

“‘ I’ll show you a better one than that, my boy,’ I chuckled. ‘ But I’m a business man : what’s your figure—the price, eh ? ’

“ He hesitated, and his lip quivered as he said—

“‘ Would—fifteen guineas be too much ? ’

“‘ Fifteen ! ’ I said.

“‘ I should take great pains with it—it will be a long task,’ he said eagerly ; and there was trouble in the

wrinkles of his forehead. ‘But if you think it too much——’

‘I think it an absurd price, sir,’ I said testily, for Smith had said he was very poor. ‘Why, my friend Wilson gave four hundred for a bit of a scrap of canvas——’

“‘By a very clever artist, sir,’ he said, with a grave smile.

“‘Look here,’ I said, ‘Mr.—Mr.—Grantly. You make a good picture of it, and I’ll give you fifty guineas.’

“He flushed, and look pained.

“‘Less than half would pay me well, sir,’ he said.

“‘Tut, tut! stuff man! Smith told me you were poor and hard up. You always will be if you are not more of a man of business.’

“‘Sir!’ he exclaimed, rising and looking at me angrily, ‘I came here expecting the treatment——’

“He stopped short, reeled, sank into his chair, and covered his face with his hands.

“‘My dear sir—I—really—I—I didn’t mean——’ I stammered, perspiring at every pore, for the position was most painful.

“‘No, no,’ he said hastily, ‘I beg your pardon. But—but,’ he continued, striving manfully to master his emotion, ‘I have been very ill, sir, and I am weak. I have been unfortunate—almost starving at times. I have not broken bread since yesterday morning—I could not without selling my colours. I—I am much obliged—forgive me—let me go back to town. Oh, my God! has it come to this?’

“He sank back half fainting, but started as I roared

out, 'Go away!' for Cobweb was coming into the room.

"'Thank you,' he said, softly as he saw what I had done. 'It was kind of you.'

"'My dear fellow,' I said, 'this is terrible;' and I mopped my face. 'There, sit still—back directly.'

"I ran out to find Cobweb in the hall.

"'Oh, you dear, good father!' she cried, with tears in her eyes. 'What a kind surprise! But is anything wrong?'

"'Artist little faint,' I said. 'Here, the sherry—biscuits. Stop away a bit.'

"I ran back with them, and made him take some wine; and, thus revived, he rose and thanked me.

"What are you going to do? I said, staring.

"'I'm going back to town, sir,' he said quietly, but with his lower lip trembling. 'I am not fit to undertake the task. I thank you, but it is too late. I am not well.'

"I looked at him with business eyes, and in that brief glance, as in a revelation, I saw the struggles of a poor proud man of genius, who could not battle with the world. I saw the man who had sold, bit by bit, everything he owned, in his struggle for daily bread; and as I looked at him I felt ashamed that I should be so rich, and fat, and well.

"'Mr. Grantly,' I said, offering my hand, 'I am a rough man, and spoiled by bullying people, and having my own way. I beg your pardon for what I have said, and am going to say. You came down here, sir, to paint my little girl's portrait, and you are going to paint it before you go back to town; and when you do

go, you are going to have fifty guineas in your pocket. Hush ! not a word, sir. My old friend Tom Smith told me that you were a gentleman and a man of honour. Tom Smith is never deceived. Now, sir, please come into the dining-room and have some lunch. Not a word, please. If good food won't bring you round, you shall have the doctor ; for, as the police say,' I continued, laughing, ' "you're my prisoner"—but on parole.'

"He tried to speak, but could not, and turned away.

" ' All right,' I said, ' all right ; ' and I patted him on the shoulder, and walked away to the window for a few minutes before I turned back to find him more composed.

" That afternoon we all three went out into the wood, and I made Cobweb stand as I had seen her on that day.

" Grantly was delighted, and insisted upon making a sketch at once ; and then the days wore on, with the painting progressing slowly, but in a way that was a wonder to me, so exquisite was every touch, for the artist's whole soul was in his work.

" Those were delightful days, but there was a storm coming. I quite took to the young fellow, though, and by degrees heard from him his whole story—how, young and eager, he had, five years before, come to town to improve in his art, and how bitter had been his struggle, till, just before he had encountered Smith, he had been really, literally dying of sickness and want.

" It was a happy time, that, for when the painting was over for the morning we gardened, or strolled in the country—our new friend being an accomplished

botanist, and a lover of every object that we saw. I used to wonder how he had learned so much, and found time to paint as well.

“I say it was a happy time for the first three weeks, and then there were clouds.

“Cobweb was changed. I knew it but too well. I could see it day by day. Grantly was growing distant too, and strange, and my suspicions grew hour by hour, till I was only kept from breaking out by the recollection of Tom Smith's words—‘He is a gentleman and a man of honour.’

“‘Tom Smith never was wrong,’ I said one morning, as I sat alone, ‘and for a man like that, after my kindness, to take advantage of his position to win that girl's love from me, would be the act of the greatest scoun—’

“‘May I come in, Mr. Burrows?’ said the voice of the man of whom I was thinking.

“‘Yes, come in,’ I said; and there we stood looking in one another's eyes.

“‘He's come to speak to me,’ I said, and my heart grew very hard, but I concealed my feelings till he spoke, and then I was astounded.

“‘Mr. Burrows,’ he said, ‘I've come to say good-bye.’

“‘Good-bye!’ I said.

“‘Yes, sir: good-bye. I have wakened from a dream of happiness to a sense of misery of which I cannot speak. Let me be brief, sir, and tell you that I shall never forget your kindness.’

“‘But you haven't finished the picture.’

“‘No, sir, and never shall,’ he said bitterly. ‘Mr.

Burrows, I cannot stay. I—that is—I need not be ashamed to own it, I love your child with all my heart.'

" 'I knew it,' I said bitterly.

" 'And you think I have imposed on your kindness. No, sir, I have not, for I have never shown by word or look—'

" 'No, you scoundrel,' I said to myself, 'but she knows it all the same.'

" 'And, sir, such a dream as mine could never be fulfilled—it is impossible.'

" 'Yes,' I said, in a cold hard voice, 'it is impossible.'

" 'God bless you, sir! Good-bye.'

" 'You will not say good-bye to her?' I said harshly.

" He shook his head, and as I stood there, hard, selfish, and jealous of him, I saw him go down the path, and breathed more freely, for he was gone.

" Gone, but there was a shadow on my home. Cobweb said not a word, and expressed no surprise, never even referring to the picture, but went about the house slowly, drooping day after day, month after month, till the summer time came round again, and I knew that in my jealous selfishness I was breaking her young heart.

" She never complained, and was as loving as ever; but my little Cobweb was broken, and the tears spangled it like dew whenever it was alone.

" It was as nearly as could be a year after, that I, feeling ten years older, went to seek her one afternoon, and found her as I expected, in the little wood, standing dreamy and sad in her old position leaning upon

the tree, listening to no bird-song now, but with a far-off longing look in her eyes, that swept away the last selfish thought from my heart.

“ I did not let her see me, but went straight up to Smith’s, learned what I wanted, and a short time after I was in a handsome studio in St. John’s Wood, staring at the finished picture of my child—painted, of course, from memory—framed, against the wall.

“ As I stood there, I heard the door open, and turning stood face to face with Grantly.

“ We looked in each other’s eyes for a few moments without speaking, and then in a trembling, broken voice, I said—

“ ‘ Grantly, I’ve come as a beggar now. My poor darling—God forgive me!—I’ve broken her heart! ’

“ It was my turn to sit down, trembling and weak, while my dear boy tried to comfort me—telling me too with pride how he had worked and become famous, and in a few more months had meant to come down and ask my consent.

“ But there, I’m mixing it up. Of course he told me that as we were rushing along, having just had time to catch the express ; and on reaching the station there was no conveyance, and we had to walk.

“ That scoundrel would not wait, but ran on without me, and when I got there, panting and hot, I found my darling’s heart was mended with all of that belonging to the man from whose arms she ran to hide her rosy blushes on my breast.

“ I’m not the selfish old fellow that I was about Cobweb, for there, in the old place, where they’ve let me stay with them, I pass my time with those two flossy-

haired little tyrants, Cobweb the Second, and the Spider, as we call little Frank.

“Ah! Miss Stoneleigh, it’s a funny thing this love. You’ve been lucky. As for me, I bring up a sweet girl, whom I love with all my heart, and soon learn that she is not mine, for the first fellow that comes down and pretends that he loves her, it’s ‘Snip! ’ says one ‘Snap! ’ says the other; the old father’s nowhere, and his darling’s gone.”

“Leaving him a miserable, unhappy man for life,” I said quietly; while he stared at me as if he could not understand my drift,—“one who takes no pleasure in his daughter’s new-born happiness; in his new son’s pride in his sweet young wife; and who, above all, utterly detests his little grandchildren.”

“No; I’m blest if he does,” he cried warmly; “for of all the pretty little flossy-haired tyrants that ever made a poor old fellow do as they like, they’re about the worst. I say, do come down, Miss Stoneleigh. I want you to hear little Cobweb sing ‘Buttercups and Daisies.’ It’s fine, ma’am—‘it’s fine!’ ”

“I’ll come down, Mr. Burrows,” I said, with a dreamy feeling of restfulness coming over me as I pictured myself again in the pretty rustic home amidst the sweet scenes and heaven-born sights of the country. How true, indeed, are those words, that man made the town, but God made the country! I often think of the words of a pale, sallow, thin girl I met once at a friend’s. She turned upon me quite in surprise as I said I should prefer living always in the country.

“Oh, really!” she exclaimed, in a pitiful tone. “The country is so dreadfully slow. I never know how people can manage to exist there.”



"WITH A FAR-OFF LONGING LOOK IN HER EYES"—(see p. 269).

"And yet," I thought, "they do, and are happier and healthier amidst its innocent pleasures. They miss concert, ball, and party, but they see such sights as are never dreamed of in town. I could enumerate many, but there is no need."

Mr. Burrows rose and left me, promising to call for me later on, and I spent a fortnight in the pleasant country home, to come back refreshed and ready for my old task of trying to help and comfort those amongst whom I may be thrown. Sadness comes over me at times when I think of the past, but I chase the gloomy feelings away, telling myself that I am ungrateful for the calm and peaceful life it has been my fate to lead. Friends I have many, and the more I may be with the humble people of our great city, the more I find beneath the hard crust grown upon them in their rough contest with the world, how many good and generous feelings exist. I have noted that if a beggar, with a piteous tale of woe or a mournful ballad, wishes to make money, it is not sought for amongst the homes of the wealthy, but from the hard toiling poor ; and, what is more, I have seen that the surest blows that are struck at the vices and miseries that exist, are those which aim at giving the thronging thousands of our denser places better homes. There can be no doubt that much of the moral as well as physical disease that disgraces our great city is caused by over-crowding, and every step taken to give low-priced wholesome dwellings, does more to ameliorate these plagues than even education and the spread of knowledge.

I think as one who has mingled with the poorer classes day by day, and though my experience may not

be great, surely it is of some little value—contains some germs of truth.

And now my pleasant task is ended—a pleasant one indeed ; for it has served to bring up recollections of scenes—some sad, some tinged with happiness ; and as I have placed scene and word on paper, I have been once more amongst the speakers, and stood with them in their homes. If the reader can only realize these scenes, fancy he hears the speeches one-tenth part as vividly as I, my task will not have been without its reward.

THE END.

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